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Empowering New Identities in Postcolonial Literature by Francophone Women Writers

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Empowering New Identities in Postcolonial Literature by Francophone Women Writers

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wonderful husband Dylan Schleppe whose constant support and encouragement made it possible for me to juggle my own complicated identities of wife, mother, student and teacher and finally finish this insane endeavor. This accomplishment is as much his as it is mine.

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Twentieth-century French scholars have extensively studied postcolonial literature dealing with identity issues rooted in colonialism, yet these studies do not address the emergence of new definitions of Identity found in the controversial literature of today's Francophone women writers of immigrant descent living outside their country of origin – either in France or is the U.S. My dissertation is such a study. It shows how through their novels, these young writers re-define and re-construct such notions as race, gender, ethnicity and nationality and are continuously challenging fixed, hegemonic labels such as "French," "Black," "Woman," "African," and "American." I explore the methods of resistance to these powerful labels and how this resistance leads to a mediation of identities in three Francophone women writers from different French ex-colonies: Calixthe Beyala from Cameroon, Leïla Sebbar from Algeria and Edwidge Danticat from Haiti. I show how the intersections between plural identities serve as sites of negotiating and re-creating the "postcolonial woman"

and how through their work postcolonial Francophone women writers dare to imagine new realities in a constantly shifting and emerging multi-ethnic society.

The dissertation is divided into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The introduction discusses the power of fixed identity labels and shows how until now they have been taken for granted in Francophone literatures. I present my theoretical approaches to the breakdown of these labels by introducing Homi Bhabha's definition of hybridity as a "metonymy of identity" or Identity as performance. I expand on Judith Butler's idea of women's "performance of gender" as a more complex "performance" for black or African women living in such multi-cultural cities as Paris and New York.

The first chapter focuses on Leïla Sebbar's work and on the "interstices" created by the constant mobility and instability found in her *Shérazade* trilogy. It shows how in the texts themselves (both in structure and content) as well as outside the texts (in personal comments, correspondences, interviews, etc.) Sebbar negotiates Identity within the "open spaces" that result from the intersections or interactions of the "here' and "there" as well as the "then" and "now."

The second chapter focuses on the re-creation of female identity in Calixthe Beyala's *Assèze l'Africaine* by looking at how the female protagonists juggle between Western definitions of femininity and that of their mothers and grandmothers. This chapter shows how the "performance of gender" becomes a much more complex performance for Black or African women living in a multicultural city like Paris.

The third chapter explores the work of Edwidge Danticat and shows how through her re-telling of traditions/the past Identity gets re-invented. I discuss the power of storytelling passed down from generations of women, and I rely on Trinh T. Minh-ha's ideas on women and storytelling as a means of "un-writing" tradition and "writing anew." This "new" tradition serves to give voice to the

postcolonial woman's account, or *Her* story (vs. History), who otherwise is silenced in other historical discourses.

In my conclusion I explore another space of Identity negotiation which is between resisting and "conforming" by looking at reception issues (popularization of Otherness) and neo-colonialism. I examine whether these authors are affirming their emerging reality as an Identity in constant flux or whether they are just targeting an audience like Oprah Winfrey's Book Club (in the case of Danticat) or Sebbar and Beyala's multi-ethnic hip Parisian readers. I finally suggest that the space in-between these two positions is yet another way of resisting the power of identity "labels" and daring to re-create new possibilities.

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Introduction

It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond.The "beyond" is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...
Homi Bhabha, *Locations of Culture*

Thinking "beyond" White, Black, Arab, French, American, African, and so many other fixed hegemonic labels that have been reinforced for centuries all over the world, is not an easy task. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, and the racial tensions that followed, the definition of "American," for example, was definitely re-assessed by many throughout the country. Who is American? What should an American look like? And of course, should a person remotely resembling the preconceived profile of an "Arab" or "Muslim" be set aside as suspect?

Questions like these that resurface during moments of crisis – be it terrorist, social, or economical (like blaming job shortages on an excess of immigrants) are nevertheless lived and felt everyday by members of any diaspora group who continuously try to find a way to define themselves from their marginal position. Fixed labels are not sufficient anymore, though, as more and more people consider themselves part of several groups and even go "beyond" given labels and have "new" non-conventional ways of defining themselves. In

an interview regarding her work, for example, the "francophone"[1] writer, Calixthe Beyala outwardly challenges the existence of fixed identity labels. Her interviewer asks her whether her shocking writing is the "African" way to express the concerns for her people, and in turn she responds by asking: "What is the African way?"[2] This type of discourse reflects the continuous negotiating, questioning, and reformulating of Identity experienced by today's diasporic postcolonial subjects living in between cultures. Through their work, writers like Beyala from Cameroon, Leila Sebbar from Algeria and Edwidge Danticat from Haiti who live outside of their "homeland", respond to this position by re-defining and re-constructing such notions as race, gender, ethnicity and nationality through the challenging and re-fashioning of fixed hegemonic labels such as "French", "Black", "Woman", "African", "Beur" and "American" – just to name a few.

In today's global and plural societies connected now not only by television but by the easy access to the internet and thus the world, such labels are now obsolete since it is impossible to live in a vacuum untouched by your neighbors – whether they live next to you or on the other side of the ocean. The contact between different cultures and its effects are unavoidable but especially when the cultures involved have had a long-term relationship as in the case of France and its ex-colonies as well as the U.S. and any country it has occupied, like Haiti. It is

[1]The word "francophone" in this work either refers to the language of choice (i:e: French) or to the "French" elements that unavoidably make up part of these women's identities through colonization.

this constant contact that leads those who are playing both fields, as these writers do, to devise new definitions of identity by continuously rediscovering and recreating themselves through their work - daring to imagine new realities in a constantly shifting and emerging multi-ethnic society.

These women's mainstream works both in France (in the case of Beyala and Sebbar) and the U.S. (in the case of Danticat) serve as mechanisms of social change by opening the doors to the complexities of the postcolonial diasporic woman negotiating between plural identities and showing how it is possible to participate in more than one culture and achieve what Edward Said calls a "contrapuntal" awareness, an ability to be "in tune" with more than one culture at a time.

> Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal.[3]

These writers achieve this plurality of vision in their works as well as their daily lives and make it OK for all diasporic subjects to resist the power of fixed hegemonic labels and celebrate different aspects of their Otherness. These women "modulate" their identities depending on the situation they find themselves in, tapping into their plurality and finding it very resourceful and rich. This richness can at times be a struggle to find and assess, yet once one comes to

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[2] Emmanuel Matateyou, "Calixthe Beyala: Entre le terroir et l'exil," *The French Review* 69(4): 605.

terms with it and learns to "modulate" it, the dimensions of life become endless and ever-changing.

Focusing on Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade* trilogy, especially *Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisé, les yeux verts* (1982) and *Les Carnets de Shérazade* (1985), Calixthe Beyala's *Assèze l'Africaine,* and Edwidge Danticat's *krik? krak!* (1995), I propose to show how through their literature theses writers arrive at Said's "contrapuntal awareness" and are able to continuously modulate, re-negotiate and re-new their identities and in turn challenge Identity itself. The particular works studied in this dissertation focus on the diasporic movement as experienced by the modern-day "postcolonial woman" who struggles to efface any misconceptions of this title (postcolonial woman) which many times serve more to repress than to liberate minority women.[4] Thus, in order to understand the Identity discourse in these works, it is important to learn about the authors' lives and how their works reflect their own diasporic movement and experiences during the 1980's and '90s either in France or the U.S.

Leïla Sebbar was born in Algeria in 1941 to an Algerian father and French mother, both schoolteachers. She grew up in Algeria speaking French and then moved to Paris where she studied French literature. She has remained in Paris ever since and has written many novels and short stories dealing mostly with the

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[3] Edward Said, "The Mind of Winter," *Harper's Magazine* (Sept. 1984): 49.
[4] For a more in depth discussion on the expectations of the "First World" on "Third World" women writers see Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj's Introduction to *Going Global: The*

lives of Beurs, the children of Maghrebian immigrants either born or growing up in France. Nevertheless, she does address issues of all "Third World" immigrants in Paris, especially in the 1982 *Shérazade* where we see several adolescents descendants of immigrants from such places as Guadeloupe, Martinique, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and even Poland.

Like her protagonist Shérazade, Sebbar is a "croisée" or hybrid person in between two worlds and seems to come to terms with this position through her writing. In her correspondence with Nancy Huston, she explains how she needed to create Shérazade in order to go back (both physically and emotionally) to Algeria: "Elle a été ma complice, Shérazade, fugueuse de roman, pour ce retour au pays natal."[5]

Her life in Algeria was surrounded by constant exile since her father was a communist intellectual "en exil dans la culture de l'Autre, du Colonisateur, loin de sa famille" and her mother was "en exil géographique et culturel". From this double parental exile, she believes to have inherited "une disposition à l'exil," which she describes as "à la fois solitude et excentricité."[6]

It is this "excentricité" which seems to draw her to the Beurs, a group which she is not a part of, yet does connect with and relate to since she herself was a sort of "Beur" in colonized Algeria, exiled in her place of birth, living at the

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Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000) 4.

[5] Leila Sebbar and Nancy Husstin, *Lettres parisiennes: Autopsie de l'exil* (Paris: Bernard Barrault, 1986) 79.

margins of both the Algerian and French societies of the time, excluded by the "fille de colons" as she explains to Nancy Huston in their correspondence.[7] In addition, she did not practice any religion since her father didn't practice Islam and her mother didn't practice Catholicism, which added to her sense of exclusion: "Cette mise à l'écart consciente m'a exclue encore davantage des Autres qui, eux, pratiquaient: musulmans, chrétiens, juifs."[8]

For these reasons she is fascinated with these Beurs who are not really "from" their birthplace, France, nor from that of their parents. They are like her, always at the margins, yet as she explains, "forts de leurs particularismes et de leur capacité de saisir la modernité." And she continues:

> Ils sont ma mythologie, pour une part j'ose l'écrire parce que, plus vielle qu'eux de dix ou vingt ans, loin d'eux et de leur pays d'immigration, toujours à distance, je sais où je suis comme eux, proche et attentive en dépit de l'âge, du privilège d'être établie, de la différence."[9]

This experience and awareness of difference is shared by Calixthe Beyala who was born in Cameroon in 1961 yet moved to Paris in order to make a living as a writer. Her sense of alienation did not begin in France but as Sebbar, in her colonized homeland where the French lifestyle was imposed upon her from a young age. At school, she felt imprisoned as students recited "Our ancestors the Gauls" and sang "To Cameroon, the cradle of our ancestors – In days gone by you

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[6] Ibid 50.
[7] Ibid 51.
[8] Ibid 50.
[9] Ibid 60.

lived in barbarity."[10] She was trapped in between two worlds early in her life and explains, "For our leaders the disparity between schooling and local realities seemed to hold no importance whatsoever. The objective was the edification of a nation according to the universalist model – French-style."[11]

When she moved to the city of Douala in order to pursue her writing, her marginalization continued since she grew up in a "bidonville" or shanty town and did not relate to the big city life as she explains "Je fais partie des petits gens ... Le monde chic africain je ne le connais pas."[12] The need to publish her work finally brought her to Paris where she has been very successful and prolific publishing over 10 novels – one of which, *Les honneurs perdus*, won the Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française in 1996. As Sebbar, her exile in Paris has been key to her work: "Je ne pourrai pas vivre en Afrique...l'exil est ma survie...l'exil est mon auteur."[13]

As her protagonist Assèze, Beyala's exile in the Parisian space is where her identity has been mediated and re-negotiated into what she calls a "femme africaine." "Je suis avant tout une Africaine," she insists, "je suis l'Africaine typique."[14] As will be shown in Chapter 2, many conservative critics (both French and African) would probably argue with this label since Beyala is a

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[10] Calixthe Beyala, Preface to *Mon Afrique: Photographs of Sub-Saharan Africa by Pascal Maitre*, Translated by Marjolijn de Jager, (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2000) 7.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Matateyou 610.
[13] Ibid 611.
[14] Ibid 615.

modern-day Parisian who happens to be from Cameroon and whose works suggest that the label "African" is not a fixed one but one full of vitality and constant renewal. She sees herself as a "représentante d'[une] mosaique culturelle,"[15] and in *Assèze l'Africaine* , as will be examined later in this work, her protagonist is able to incorporate this plural mosaic into a constantly renewed definition of an "Africaine."

Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian American writer who left Haiti at the age of 12, also negotiates between plural identities in her collection of short stories *krik? krak!* (1995), where both the strategies of representation and the content of her narratives work together to expose the plural Haitian identities which displace the monolithic, hegemonic fixed categories of race, identity and nationality. She begins this book with the following quote by the Haitian scholar Sal Scalora: "We tell the stories so that the young ones will know what came before them. They ask krik? we say krak! Our stories are kept in our hearts." At age 30, this young writer who has been described by a fellow Haitian as "an old soul"[16] and who is viewed by many as a Haitian spokesperson, takes the pen in her hand and attempts to answer the riddle of this plurality by interweaving different narrative voices with varying experiences and thus giving voice to all those who would otherwise remain silent. She remembers the difficult times she and her family

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[15]Rangira Béatrice Gallimore, *L'Oeuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala: Le renouveau de l'écriture féminine en Afrique francophone sub-saharienne* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997) 194.
[16]Renee Shea, "Travelling Worlds with Edwidge Danticat," *Poets and Writers Magazine* Jan/Feb 1997: 44.

endured in Haiti during the Duvalier regime explaining "I just remember a lot of silence."[17] She breaks this silence through the Haitian diaspora voices she brings to life in her work which, as she explains, is in English "so that *our voices* can still come across, so that people can recognize a different voice even if I'm translating myself when I write."[18]

Writing in English is just another element of her plurality as is the "French" part of her Haitian identity, which is unavoidably incorporated into the content of her stories with references to colonization, slavery and the past. Thus calling her a "francophone" writer does not ignore all the other plural identities that make up who she is, but simply points out that this is one of those elements. Many French scholars seem to concern themselves a lot with the fact that she comes from Haiti and doesn't write in French,[19] yet they don't understand that she *is* incorporating whatever "frenchness" may be in her but simply expressing it in English. As will be shown in Chapter 3, for the Haitian diaspora, the use of the English language can be seen as a Haitian attempt at retrieving oneself imaginatively by letting go of the French language which is mostly associated with colonial and political authority.

Danticat herself remembers struggling with the French language as a child in Haiti and later again having to reconcile different worlds when she moved to

[17]Shea 44.
[18]Shea 48.

the U.S.: "When I first came [to America], I felt like I was in limbo, between languages, between countries."[20] It is from this "beyond" or "limbo" that Edwidge Danticat speaks incorporating all the different voices that create and re-create today's "Haitian" identity.

Even though these three writers use their works to negotiate and re-create identities and undermine any fixed hegemonic labels, their methods of challenging and resisting these power structures are quite different. In this dissertation I will be examining the strategies deployed by these writers in their works to render plural identities and how these strategies lead to a re-vision of cultural, racial and national identity. Firstly, it is important to understand how today's society has arrived at such labels through years of what Foucault calls "political violence." Just like Foucault sets out in his work to show how discourses within society have worked to create the power structures that dominate this same society, the writers studied here set out to first unveil these structures and then reconstruct them. Foucault explains his positioning regarding the understanding of these structures as follows:

> It seems to me that the real political task in a society is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be born neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them.[21]

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[19]This perception comes from personal experience at conferences where I've presented papers on Edwidge Danticat's mediation of identities.
[20]Christopher John Farley, "Review of *Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat," *Time Magazine* Sept. 1998, vol. 152, 78.
[21]Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 6.

These writers do not give into such identity constructions, but take their "political task" seriously by unmasking and breaking down the constructs of race, gender and nationality which have oppressed so many for so long. In the case of racial identity, going back to the nineteenth century, we find misconceptions and notions we still struggle with today. Robert Young explores in his book *Colonial Desire* many of these constructs and asserts that in nineteenth century imperialistic doctrines, "race became the fundamental determinant of human culture and history: indeed, it is arguable that race became *the* common principle of academic knowledge."[22] He explores how racial theory became a "form of cultural self-definition" for the West which re-enforced the supremacy of the White race.[23]

Supremacist thesis as that of Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of the Races* (1853-5) which set out to show how all "civilization" has been the responsibility of the White race and without it there would be no "History" per se, still carries on today wearing a different mask. Statements about race as Levi-Strauss argues, are statements about culture, and vice versa.[24] Thus, the rejection of a culture implicitly encompasses racism as Young explains:

> The close relation between the development of the concept of culture and race in the nineteenth century means that an implicit racism lies

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[22]Robert W. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995) 93.
[23]Ibid.
[24] See Robert Young p. 91 for further explanation on the connection betwen culture and race.

> powerfully hidden but repeatedly propagated within Western notions of culture. The history of culture shows that Western racism is not simply an aberrant but discrete episode in Western history that can be easily excised, as the call to 'stamp out racism' assumes.[25]

Another discursive construction still haunting us today is that of Orientalism. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said sets out to expose the Western construction of "the Orient" which has very little to do with the actuality of "the Orient." Orientalist texts he argued, "can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality that they appear to describe" and are simply "a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient."[26] He believes these texts not only silence "the Other" but also "the history of the subaltern, both in terms of the objective history of subaltern or dominated, marginalized groups, and in terms of the subjective experience of the effects of colonialism and domination."[27]

With regards to racism, in *La Force du préjugé: essai sur le racism et ses doubles,* Pierre-André Taguieff sees the urgency of doing away with these discourses of "racism" and "anti-racism," of "Orient" vs. "West," "us" vs. "them" in order to deal with the social, economic and political conflicts of today's multicultural urban societies. In addition, he concludes that French identity is "indéfinissable" thus making these identity debates futile.[28]

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[25]Ibid 91.
[26]Quoted in Young 94 and 95.
[27]Ibid 160.
[28]PierreTaguieff, "Identité national: Un débat français," *Echos* no. 78-79 (1996) 89.

Sebbar, Beyala and Danticat all address this need to dispose of this dualistic thinking by constantly moving their characters from one arena to the next until it becomes impossible to tell which "turf" we are on. This coexistence of locations is these writers' attempt at doing away with oppositional discourses, which as Taguieff concludes don't offer any type of solution anyway. In his book *Locations of Culture*, Homi Bhabha refers to this particular "location" as "the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words *au-delà*" - here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth."[29] He insists that

> It is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.[30]

Chapter 1, "Leïla Sebbar's Nomadic Reterritorializations of Idenity," will focus on these "interstices" created by the constant mobility and instability found in Sebbar's *Shérazade* trilogy and will show how in the texts themselves (both in structure and content) as well as outside the texts (in personal comments, correspondences, interviews, etc.) Sebbar negotiates Identity within the "open spaces" that result from the intersections or interactions of the "here" and "there" as well as the "then" and "now." Her protagonist runs away from home in search of "home" within herself. She moves from place to place (especially in *Les Carnets de Shérazade*) and crosses paths with many different people who help her

[29]Homi Bhabha *Locations of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 1.

discover different parts of herself. By shifting from her native Algerian origins to the modern-day Parisian lifestyle of the diaspora, Shérazade is able to "blur turfs" and create spaces of negotiation that continuously put into question French identity and nationality.

Similar shifts can also be found in Calixthe Beyala's *Assèze l'Africaine* where the protagonist is forced to perform different characters and different roles depending on each circumstance. She "infiltrates" different turfs of society and re-creates herself at the same time. In *Infiltrating Culture* Mireille Rosello defines the tactic of infiltration as creating "a mirror territory, the ghost of a powerful presence which both imitates and parodies the structure that oppresses it."[31] She insists that "infiltration" is *not* about "métissage" or "mélange" which imply "that two supposedly distinct elements (two cultures, two discourses, two races) actually blend to produce a third term," but about "juxtaposition."[32] This juxtaposition is played out through what Homi Bhabha calls a "metonymy of identity" or as Rosello explains, "discursive stagings of identity."[33] As the characters play different "parts," they continuously negotiate and modulate their own identity and force the reader to do likewise.

Chapter 2, "Calixthe Beyala's Infiltration of Identity," will focus more specifically on the re-creation of female identity by looking at how the female

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[30]Ibid 2.
[31]Mireille Rosello, *Infiltrating Culture*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996) 14.
[32]Ibid.

protagonist juggles between her "discursive stagings" or performances of European definitions of femininity vs. those of her mother and/or grandmother. For Beyala and her female characters, Judith Butler's "performance of gender"[34] becomes a much more complex "performance" as they negotiate among "performances" as Black or African women living in a multi-cultural city like Paris. As Carole Boyce Davies asserts, "the additional identity of femaleness which interferes with seamless Black identity is either ignored, erased or 'spoken for'."[35] Nevertheless, as she concludes,

> the category Black woman, or woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist.[36]

As each one of the protagonists move from turf to turf, this chapter will explore how they "adjust" their "femaleness" depending on the environment or situation they encounter. Through these performances, they expose and deconstruct such notions as "femininity" and "exoticism/orientalism" which are, not only about gender, but are strongly linked to race as well. These links were developed in the nineteenth century through "fantasies derived from cultural stereotypes in which blackness evokes an attractive, but dangerous, sexuality, an

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[33]Ibid 17.
[34]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London, Routledge, 1990).
[35]Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 8.
[36]Ibid 8.

apparently abundant, limitless, but threatening fertility."[37] The "desiring machine," as Young refers to colonialism, did not end with this era but has continued through engrained stereotypes of women of color as dark, exotic, sexual beings to be conquered or re- colonized. The idea of "double-colonization"[38] thus still lives today as these women now struggle with a double "de-colonization" by living within two patriarchies - that of their father's culture and that of the society they live in. Gloria Anzaldúa addresses this dilemma and explains how "woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey."[39]

Thus by challenging the patriarchal hegemonic definitions of "woman," the female protagonists in Beyala's work not only free themselves from the grips of two worlds but also expose the hope of new possibilities for *all* diasporic women. No longer do they need to conform to fixed labels that oppress and limit them, but are offered a new "homeplace" as a site of resistance and renewal.[40] We can think of this 'beyond' as an "imagined community" which unites all

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[37]Robert Young 97.
[38]See K. Holst-Peterson and A. Rutherford, eds. *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* (Oxford: Dangaroo Press, 1985).
[39]Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987) 20.
[40]bell hooks, *Yearinng. Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 41-49.

diasporic women dealing with such identity issues as race, gender and nationality.[41]

The performativeness of identity "beyond" the set parameters also gets played out in the re-visiting and re-negotiation of traditions, History and the past. This "restaging of the past," as Bhabha explains, "does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the presents."[42] These writers do precisely this by negotiating with a past that most of the time they haven't even experienced but which has been passed down from their ancestors through memories and stories. Edwidge Danticat's different strategies to re-write the past through the power of storytelling will be explored in Chapter 3, "Edwidge Danticat's Diaporic Voices from the 'Beyond' Rethink Creoleness and Identity." Danticat relies not exclusively but extensively, on the power of storytelling which as Trinh T. Minh-ha asserts serves to past down traditions from generations to generation of women and results in an "un-writing" of tradition in order to "write anew."[43] In Danticat we find a constant dialogue between African, Caribbean and American traditions which contest the notion of

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[41]See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 1983) for his definition of a nation as an "imagined community."
[42]Bhabha 7.
[43]Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) 119-121.

fixed identities anchored in what Pierre Nora calls "les lieux de mémoire."[44] Her protagonists re-visit histories and memories (American, French and Haitian, personal and collective) anchored in colonialism and post-colonialism and negotiate among them to re-formulate their own identity.

These writers' re-visiting of the past and re-newal of the present through this past is an attempt to retrieve a subaltern history which as Young explains "rewrites a history of the excluded, the voiceless, of those who were previously at best only the object of colonial knowledge and fantasy."[45] In the case of women, more specifically the native subaltern woman, Gayatri Spivak criticizes the absence of a discursive position from which theses women can speak.[46] She argues that even today's historians fall into the trap of ignoring these women's position and perspective, which is what writers like Sebbar, Beyala, and Danticat attempt to do through their work. As Young also explains, the subaltern woman "tends to be absent from documentary archives, and to write her history has to involve a particular effort of retrieval, or ... a particular effort of historical imagination."[47] This process requires a great deal of negotiating and re-creating, but it is eventually able to escape the dominant patriarch colonial discourse and thus propose new histories by giving a voice to otherwise silenced women.

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[44]Pierre Nora, "Entre Mémoire et histoire," in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
[45]Robert Young 162.
[46]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 271-313.

Such discourses speak to and challenge today's intellectuals, historians and politicians, who worldwide are being forced to reassess their beliefs and policies to conform to a much more dynamic and constantly changing world. Each one of the texts studied here speaks from very different places yet addresses the same unavoidable contact and vitality that results from the existence of plural identities. Whether it be in Haiti, Algeria, Cameroon, France or the U.S., today's diasporic writers are engaging with and responding to the negotiation of identities both within themselves as well as everywhere around them. Their works not only respond to these changing trends but also anticipate (or propose?) a new emerging popularity for the "multi-ethnic" which has become more and more prominent since the early 1990's and still continues today.

In my conclusion, I explore these developing reception issues of popularization of Otherness as well as concerns of neo-colonialism resulting from this trend. I examine whether these authors are affirming the emerging reality of an Identity in constant flux or whether they are just targeting an audience like Oprah Winfrey's Book Club (in the case of Danticat) or Sebbar and Beyala's multi-ethnic hip Parisian readers. Could the space in-between these positions be yet another way of resisting the power of "labels," infiltrating the dominant culture, and re-creating new identities? It is not just by chance that these writers

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[47]Ibid.

have proven to be very powerful and influential in today's intellectual and mainstream worlds.

Chapter 1: Leïla Sebbar's Nomadic Reterritorializations of Identity

In their 1975 book *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure,* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari set out to show how "minor" literatures by native speakers of "major" languages can be a revolutionary tool in "deterritorializing" the dominant language and thus the culture behind it. Writers who chose to write in the dominant language, they explain, are like "un chien qui fait son trou, un rat, qui fait son terrier. Et, pour cela, trouver son propre point de sous-développement, son propre patois, son tiers monde à soi, son désert à soi."[48] The search for deterritorializing the dominant thought, as Samia Mehrez points out, is not the ultimate goal of today's contemporary postcolonial writers who "seek to acquire and legitimate territory" for themselves, or in other words to reterritorialize the given dominant territory.[49] Deterritorialization is not just a by-product of this search, but a key element in an overall effort at employing what Winifred Woodhull sees as "deconstructive strategies to dismantle fixed identities (whether of oppressor or oppressed)."[50] In order to arrive at a renewed territory which is originally "marked by preexisting, overdetermined conditions and borders," Anne Donadey concludes in her analysis of Sebbar's *Shérazade*, there must be both a

[48]Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1975), 33.
[49]Samia Mehrez, "The *Beur* Writer: A Question of Territory," *Yale French Studies* vol. 82 (1993): 27.
[50]Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization and Literatures* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 100.

"grounded and a nomadic practice constantly negotiating between fixed and objectifying representations."[51]

This constant mobility and displacement is what characterizes the works and life of Sebbar who is part of a diaspora culture creating its own "imagined community" or territory out of a multiplicity of positions.[52] "The siginifier diaspora denotes a predicament of multiple locations," as James Clifford explains.

> Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and estrangement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place.[53]

These complex multiple sites are those of a "nomad" as defined by Deleuze et Guattari who believe that such individuals are not at all like migrants who have a definite destination moving from point A to point B regardless of the latter's hospitality. "The nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him [or her] are relays along a trajectory."[54] This trajectory through a never-ending network of intersecting "plateaux" is charged with intense experiences that result from the contact of differences. Deleuze and Guattari's "subversive nomad thought," as Lisa Lowe asserts, "celebrates heterogeneity rather than essentializing oppositions or identities; it is simultaneous rather than hierarchical, chronological, or

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[51] Anne Donadey, "Cultural *Métissage* and the Play of Identity in Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade* Trilogy," Borders, Exiles, Diasporas, ed. Elazar Baarkan and Marie-Denise Sheldon (Stanford, California: Stanford University Presss, 1998) 270-271.

[52] This phrase is borrowed from Benedict Andersen's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

[53] James Clifford, "Diaspora," *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (1994): 319 and 311.

[54] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* p. 380 from translation

proportioned."[55] Nomadism does not create or occupy a third closed space outside binary/fixed limits but "traverses these settled distinctions, shifts and displaces them, and ultimately restituates them as different *loci*."[56]

Nomad writers, by shifting and displacing the "given" definitions of identity, create new codes and force us to see the complexities of multiculturalism and thus adapt to new nomadic/everchanging definitions. These women writers are as Michel de Certeau asserts "experimenters and inventors of solutions, [...the] pioneers of civilization founded on the mixing of cultures."[57] This chapter will explore the different nomadic strategies Sebbar deploys in her work to imagine new territories and thus invent/suggest new solutions.

In her correspondence with Nancy Huston published in the mid 80's, Leïla Sebbar explains how every time she has to talk about herself as a writer, she has to repeat the same old story: that French is her native tongue, that she is not an immigrant, nor a "Beur" (name given to the children of North African immigrants in France)[58], but that she is just in exile from her father's country, of which she has memories, living in her mother's country, that of her language, of her work, of her children but where she doesn't truly find her "land." "Ma seule terre...c'est

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[55] Lisa Lowe, "Literary Nomadics in Francophone Allegories of Postcolonialism: Pham Van Ky and Tahar Ben Jelloun," *Yale French Studies*, 82 (1993): 46.
[56] Ibid 47.
[57] Michel de Certeau, Idéologie et diversité culturelle," *Diversité culturelle, Société Industrielle, Etat national* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984) 231-32. Quoted and translated in Woodhull's *Transfigurations* p. 101.
[58] For a detailed analysis of what constitutes a "true" Beur see Michel Laronde's "La 'Mouvance beure': émergence médiatique," *The French Review* 161:5 (1988) 684-692.

l'écriture,"[59] she insists and it is there that she re-negotiates herself and where she creates a "new territory" and accomplishes her task of giving, as she explains, "un droit de cité littéraire, un peu particulier en France, dans la littérature française, à des métèques, à des riens, à des Arabes."[60]

The fact that she rejects labels such as "immigrée," "enfant de l'immigration," "écrivain maghrébin d'expression française" and admits that "ma langue maternelle n'est pas l'arabe" upsets many Magrebi intellectuals who cannot comprehend how she dares write about Arabs when she can't even speak their language (*LP* 125). In addition, how dare she write under an Arabic name (her father's). One Moroccan student went so far as to ask her why she didn't change her name to something more "anonyme, neutre, universalisant" (*LP* 126). Thus, every time she attempts to explain her position, she reproaches herself for simplifying something so complex, as she explains to Huston:

> Si je parle d'exil, je parle aussi de croisements culturels; c'est à ces points de jonction ou de disjonction où je suis que je vis, que j'écris, alors comment décliner une identité simple? (*LP* 125)

Later in the same letter she admits that she must be able to affirm "sans ambigüité, sans culpabilité, en me réservant le temps de développer les subtilités de cette position particulière qui est la mienne: je suis Française" (*LP* 126).

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[59] Leïla Sebbar and Nancy Huston, *Lettres parisiennes* (Paris: Bernard Berrault 1986), 125. Further references to this book will use the abbreviation *LP* and the page number.
[60] Monique Hugon, "Leïla Sebbar ou l'exil productif," *Notre Librairie* 84 (July-September 1986) 37.

The Frenchness that Sebbar identifies with is not the monolithic fixed category of "French-French" that the right-wing in France claims exists.[61] This claim to be French, as Winifred Woodhull explains, "productively alter[s] the terms of debates about Frenchness – what it is, whose voices and experience count in determining its contours, and the means by which it may be revised."[62] Sebbar's Frenchness celebrates and encompasses the multiethnicity of France in the 80's and goes beyond monolithic discourses. "Beyond," Bhabha asserts, "signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future." He explains that

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.[63]

Writers like Sebbar, as Bhabha explains of the "postcolonial," transform the present into an expanded and "ex-centric site of experience and empowerment."[64] With regards to eccentricities, it is interesting to note that Sebbar also uses this term to describe her situation. She sees her "exil" as both "solitude and excentricité" (*LP* 50), and in her work she is able to express and use

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[61] See Fernand Braudel's *L'Identité de la France: Les Hommes et les choses* (Paris : Flammarion, 1986).
[62] Woodhull, 106.
[63] Bhabha, *Locations of Culture* 2.
[64] Ibid 4.

this eccentricity to negotiate a new and revised space of identity which as Bhabha explains "takes you 'beyond' yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present."[65]

These conditions are never constant and stable but are full of energy and continuously being re-invented in Sebbar's *Shérazade* trilogy.[66] Just as the writer feels "au bord toujours, d'un côté et de l'autre, en déséquilibre permanent," her characters as well as the text itself are in constant mobility and instability. One can see in each of her characters a part of the writer that only in fiction, as she explains, can she bring them together: "C'est là (in fiction) et seulement là que je me rassemble corps et âme et que je fais les ponts entre les deux rives" (*LP* 138). For her, fiction is a place "rassembleur des divisions," and admits that her books are "le signe, les signes de mon histoire de croisée" (*LP* 126). Similarly, the idea of "gatherings," of divisions or identities, as a liberating process is presented by Bhabha as a means of resistance to fixed oppressive hegemonic labels and of participating in a given community.[67]

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[65] Ibid 3.

[66] References to *Sherazade: 17 ans, brune, frisee, les yeux verts* (Paris: Stock, 1982) will be abbreviated as *S* and followed by page numbers. References to *Les Carnets de Shérazade* will be abbreviated as *CS* and followed by page numbers.

[67] Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1989) 291.

Most of Sebbar's characters are also "croisés" or, as A. James Arnold translates it, "braided"[68] and like Sebbar are trying to make a bridge and gather divisions to make a whole. They are children of mixed couples living in France where at least one parent (if not both) is not French. These young "fugueurs" are constantly crossing or shifting territories either physically or emotionally. The young people in Sebbar's *Shérazade* are constantly "claiming" different and supposedly opposed territories and can never settle definitely in one because of their multiethnicity. These territorial shifts ultimately cause the line dividing them to blur since the characters change sides with such ease. Nevertheless, what's mostly important in Sebbar's strategies of coexistence is the fact that she shows that this phenomena is *not* a postcolonial outcome but that these French and Arab spaces have been dialoguing or mutually "invading" each other for centuries. Her message is a political one directed both at the right wing and at the immigrant community who insist on remaining separate from each other.

The two first *Shérazade* novels were written in the mid 1980's, a time when France became increasingly multi-ethnic due to an increase in immigration mostly from the North African ex-colonies of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The notion of French identity became a national debate between the right and left political parties mostly because of the formers' fear of a threat to France's

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68 A. James Arnold in *Regards sur le roman des années 80* (Stanford University: Anma Libri, 1994).

supposed homogeneity. As Pierre Taguieff points out, it is now possible to speak of a "logique contradictorielle" because, as has been noted, France is "un pays de métèques avec une très forte idéologie antimétèque."[69] It is a country which has constructed its identity on the concept of universality, and yet Jean-Marie Le Pen's right wing gained much support in the mid 80's and afterwards. Sebbar expresses her concerns regarding this power and its effect on immigrants as follows:

> Contre les immigrés, la droite et l'extrême droite gagnent; alliées, elles sont plus fortes que la gauche avec ses bonnes intentions et ses bons sentiments sans effet. (*LP* 59)

It is in this political atmosphere that we find Sebbar trying to "gather divisions" in *Shérazade*. The two novels form a unity which can be divided into two phases of Shérazade's self– "gathering"/learning. The first novel is the protagonist's "contrapuntal awareness" (to quote Said again) where she realizes, through her different interactions and discoveries, that there are different parts of herself and that these "divisions" or differences are viewed by others very differently than she originally thought. The second novel is her search to understand and teach others how these divisions have been created, turning her nomadism into a pedagogical journey.

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[69]Pierre Taguieff quoted in Dina Sherzer's "French Colonial and Post-colonial hybridity: Condition Métisse," *Journal of European Studies* 128 (1-2) Mar-June 1998, 103.

Shérazade is a 17 year old girl of Algerian descent living in Paris who runs away from home supposedly to return to Algeria and lives "everywhere" (in Paris) as she says. She is running away from a fixed identity, that of the title of the first novel, which as Anissa Talahite explains "confines the main character within a fixed and objectifying definition of identity: the police description."[70] For the missing person report, the father is unable to describe her daughter using the inspector's choices and thus the form gets filled in by the policeman who has the last word. As Talahite asserts, "[e]xternal visible signs – relying on racist categorization – inscribe Shérazade into a reductive and unilateral definition of her identity."[71]

To escape any fixed location, she can sometimes be found at the "squat" (an abandoned building) where several other young people of immigrant descent live, or at some friend's house, and sometimes no one (including the reader) knows where she is. On her way to Algeria, she goes all over Paris in the first book and all over France in the second book as if on a symbolic quest for *her* Algeria. "C'est Shérazade qui ira en Algérie, dans l'Algérie contemporaine," says Sebbar, "mais sans moi" (*LP* 79). I will show how this "Algeria" has nothing to do with the physical place or country since Shérazade never actually arrives there, but how it is an intervening, hybrid cultural space *within* France where identity

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[70] Anissa Talahite, "Odalisques et Pacotille: Identity and Representation in Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts*," *Nottingham French Studies* 37(2), 1998 Autumn: 66.
[71] Talahite 71.

gets continuously challenged, re-negotiated and re-invented in her constant flight. "Fuguer c'est aller vers le croisement," explains Sebbar, "la fugue est le mouvement de l'exil."[72]

Shérazade's "fugue" takes her to a myriad of "croisements" between people of different backgrounds both culturally and socially, as well as different geographical locations. "Je vais où je veux, quand je veux et ma place c'est partout," she declares and no one can stop her. We know things aren't going to be black and white or French and Arab when the novel begins at a McDonald's with the protagonist drinking a Coca-Cola, her drink of choice throughout the entire trilogy even though some think this "un affront" to France (*CS* 117). She also chooses not to eat French bread but rather that from Macdo even if she knows that "c'est pas le meilleur" (*S* 48). This location is the ultimate blurred turf since it is not a truly claimable territory, being that one can find a McDonald's as well as drink a Coke almost anywhere in the world. Both socially and culturally it is anyone's land.

In addition to her culinary choices, her wardrobe also reflects her diversity and non-conformity. Her insistence on wearing her walkman over her "foulard de Barbès," even though this tears the threads of the scarf and gets all tangled up (*S* 8), announces this young woman's determination to have it all and "gather" or create herself with whatever pieces she chooses. She is continuously re-inventing

[72] Hugon 37.

herself through her clothing and thus affecting people's cultural preconceptions or stereotypes: "Shérazade en jean, Adidas et blouson de cuir n'évoquait pas immédiatement les odalisques ou les Algériennes" (S 198). As Alec Hargreaves has noted of children of North African immigrants living in France, there is a "gap between self perceptions and perceptions imposed by others,"[73] but Shérazade plays with this gap by constantly shifting between the two.

Most of her image changes occur through substituting or exchanging one thing for another. For example, she refuses to continue wearing the cheap boots her mother had bought for her at a Monoprix, a cheap store mostly frequented by immigrants. The only way she can dispose of them is through stealing, and she replaces them with a nice pair of expensive red shoes at a very exclusive boutique. Most of her clothes are stolen and she sees no obstacles when there is something she likes. She is not attached to the clothes themselves as she "oubliait les lieux précis de ses vols, aussi vite que les objets eux-mêmes qu'elle entreposait dans le bas d'un placard, et dont tout le monde se servait au squatt" (*S* 37). Shérazade even steals from her mother when she runs away from home and takes a white woolen *burnous*, a sort of cloak with a hood, and her mother's jewelry, "des bijoux qu'elle a rapporté d'Algérie" (*S* 100) as well as some that her father had given her here in France. She admits that she keeps them and doesn't

[73] Alec Hargreaves, "Ni beurs, ni immigrés, ni jeunes issus de l'immigration," paper presented at the "Ni Beurs, ni Immigrés" conference, University of Westminster, London, 2 November 1996. Quoted in Talahite 66.

wear them or sell them. They serve as bridges to her family and history and are pieces of herself that she chooses to take along with her.

She does what she feels like doing regardless of what anyone thinks. Even if she gets accused by her friends of being an *harki*[74] when she chooses to speak French over Arabic, she doesn't care and answers: "J'ai pas envie de te parler en arabe c'est tout" (*S* 139). Her choice of smoking Camels vs Marlboro or Gauloises is another non-conforming position she takes at the squat. Her friends at the squat, the "Algériens d'Algérie" all smoke the American cigarettes which they called *Sonaposes*, on analogy with *Sonatrac* and all the *Sociétés Nationales* which had given rise to all the *Sonas*.[75] With this label they are limiting themselves to these immigrant spaces which keep them marginalized from French society. They refuse to smoke Gauloises since "personne dans la bande n'aurait osé sortir une brune devant les autres, fumer des brunes de minables, pas cher, françaises, c'était la honte…" (*S* 182). By choosing to smoke Camels, "à cause du chameau" (*CS* 39), she gathers both the Western aspect of a popular cigarette and holds on to something as Arab as a camel. She refuses to have to choose between sides and is able to stay in both without losing anything.

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[74] An *harki* was an Algerian who volunteered to fight in the French army against the forces of Resistance during the Algerian War; repatriated to France, they were called "French Muslims."
[75] *Sonatrac*, acronym for *Société Nationale de Transport et de Commercialisation des Hydrocarbures.* Other "*Sonas"* Include the *Sonacotra*, *Société Nationale de Construction de Logements pour Travailleurs*, by extension, the immigrant workers living in the blocks of sub-economic flats, built to house them.

Names are also important within the narrative of the *Shérazade* novels since part of Shérazade's nomadic character is her ability to shift identities and with these shifts we often see her changing her name accordingly. These shifts are many times a way of playing or going along with others' Orientalist preconceptions as she does towards the end of *Carnets* when she tells a young man she's just met that her name is Balkis. "Comme la reine de Saba?", he exclaims in disbelief (*CS* 268), and she leads his fantasy on until she reveals her real name, which doesn't seem to change the Orientalist fantasy he has already fabricated. Shérazade also uses other names (Camille and Rosa) "suivant la personne" (*S* 87) as she explains "Ça dépend avec qui je suis" (*S* 180). Named Camille she can become a French girl and can even pass as the niece of a French farmer out in the country (*CS* 169). In Addition, she is able to completely recreate her identity through fake ID's which her friend Pierrot procures for her: "Je m'appellerai Rosa. Rosa Mire et j'aurai dix-huit ans, je serai majeure. Je serai née à Paris XIVe et je serai étudiante en psycho…Je serai française…" (*S* 179).

Her name as well is an example of this dual position. The fact that the name Schéhérazade of the *Mille et une nuits* is turned into a French name because of the *h muet* is troubling and intriguing to many. Her name "provoquait souvent des reactions bizarres, inattendues, incontrôlables" (*CS* 140). "Vous croyez qu'on peut s'appeler Shérazade comme ça?" asks Julien Desrosiers upon meeting her

unable to believe her audacity. Later in *Carnets*, Octave's reaction is much more exaggerated as he refuses to accept this French version of the "vraie" Shéhérazade:

> Il était inconcevable pour lui qu'une fille de son âge, en France, dans les dernières années du XXe siècle, portât ce nom là. C'était sacrilege…Non! Non! Quel gratte-papier inculte a enregistré ainsi un nom si sublime. On l'a dénaturé…(*CS* 141)

He insists that he will call her "Shéhérazade, comme la vraie," but Shérazade could care less and responds that to her "c'est pareil" (*CS* 141), reinforcing her dual position.

Julien, on the other hand, tries to find some kind of solution. "Et pourquoi pas Aziyadé?" he ironically suggests another name questioning her ability to play both parts and trying to make sure she is identified accordingly. The fact that Aziyadé, a young and beautiful Turkish slave from a harem who was Pierre Loti's lover, had green eyes like Shérazade gives Julien a good reason to label her within that mold. Her green eyes do not fit the preconceived picture of an Arab woman, so he must find an archetype to this deviation and project his own fantasies onto her.[76]

The green eyes are an issue through the entire novel and serve as a marker of her in-betweeness or eccentricity wherever she goes. In the French person's

[76] As is discussed later in this study, Edward Said's *Orientalism* addresses such connections between the "Orient" and sex fantasies.

eyes, it makes her "not quite" so Arab and this blurs or questions her identity as well as that of the French as in the following quote:

> [Gilles] ne savait pas si la fille était espagnole, indienne naturaliseé, peut-être libanaise […] Elle était peut-être française après tout, il existait des Français qui n'ont pas forcement l'air de Français… (*CS* 46-47).

This conflict with her green eyes also shows the ignorance of many towards the many different Arab or even Maghrebi people. Sebbar subtly subverts the West's idea of a dark Arab woman when Krim, a Beur living in the squat, realizes Shérazades eyes are green: "Comme ma mère. Ma mère est berbère, elle est blonde et elle a des yeux clairs, verts ou bleus, je sais pas" (*S* 63). Krim is then described as light complected with red hair and gray eyes. Sebbar again uses the same kind of subvertion as she adds that when he and his friend Eddy, who "avait l'air plus Arabe que lui" are in the metro; Eddy, "né à Sarcelles dans une famille de juifs tunisiens," is the one stopped first by the cops (*S* 63-64).

THE SQUAT

One of Shérazade's "homes" or territories is the squat, an abandoned building where young runaways like Krim live. It is an ethnic microcosm where people of all cultural backgrounds have willingly marginalized themselves and share not only an enclosed space but all their personal belongings, stories, and feelings. These multiple contacts create cultural bridges among them and expand their own identities allowing for even more creativity and diversity in their self-

negotiation. For example, the comradery between Pierrot, son of a Polish immigrant, and Basile, a Guadelopean immigrant, allows for a sharing and exchange of customs to the point of appropriation, as in the following scene:

> Pierrot et Basile préparaient un plat antillais et Pierrot prétendait connaître mieux que Basile les épices spéciales et le dosage pour la sauce du poisson. (*S* 32)

What all these young people share as well is a restlessness to be elsewhere. Both Djamila and Shérazade continuously talk about returning to Algeria, Basile about going to Africa, and Pierrot is just going somewhere but doesn't know where. It is interesting to note that those who do leave France immediately return as if not being able to do without a part of themselves. The one who doesn't physically leave France is Shérazade, who serves as the ultimate successful modulator as she is able to maintain all her contacts.

The main reason Shérazade is more comfortable switching worlds is that she is not taken over by the political/polemical fervor of her fellow squatters, even though she does participate in some robberies. Pierrot's extreme militant views, for example, completely consume his life since he seems to want to save the world. He never really does anything about his views, but just preaches to the rest as in this long tirade:

> Vous vous foutez de tout ce qui se passe dans le monde partout même en France… Vous vous en foutez des prisonniers politiques au Maroc en

> Amérique Latine en Russie en Afrique noir en Europe en France aussi et de la torture vous vous en foutez…(*S*167)

Another fervent and confused militant is Farid, a young Algerian immigrant who is obsessed with the Algerian War even though he knows little about it. In him he finds "l'exaltation, la détermination de ceux qui préparaient la guerre de libération algérienne, mais la cause n'était plus la même. Elle n'était pas aussi claire ni aussi simple" (*S* 56). Both of these extremists die, Farid commits suicide without any explanation and Pierrot dies in a car explotion.

Even though these young men's views are extreme and violent, they do serve as a critique of French society and its racism. Through Pierrot, Sebbar doesn't hesitate to criticize police brutality towards young Beurs and mentions actual events which appeared on the news like the killings of "Kader de Vitry Zanouda de Vaulx-en-Vexin Laouri et Zahir de Marseille" (*S* 167). These subversive tactics serve not only to remind the immigrant youth and call them to action, but to warn of the hate and bitterness boiling in France. These young people are not going to continue hiding in the HLMs but are moving into French society and are becoming an important part of it.

The fact that the squat is in the city and not in the *banlieue* is very important since it concretizes the presence of these young immigrants in French society. They are able to navigate both worlds with ease because of this proximity and at times (very few) are even perceived as "French." At one point an Algerian

man on business in Paris calls Shérazade a "Parisienne" who would be bored "à mourir en Algérie" (*S* 187). Rachid as well gets taken as a Parisian by his racist girlfriend's mother: "Vous êtes sûr que vous êtes un Arabe? Vous parlez comme un Français de Paris" (*S* 144).

Most importantly, Sebbar shows how solid their presence is in France by making references to specific Beur media. She specifically names all the "radio libres" including many Beur radiostations that Shérazade listens to and even gives their frequencies (*S* 33). As Michel Laronde asserts, "les radios libres sont le lien qui soude la communauté"[77] but not only the Beur community but all the potential listeners who may not necessarily be Beurs. The presence of this media exposes the multiculturalism of cities like Marseille and Paris as Laronde explains: "En commun avec Radio Gazelle à Marseille, Radio-Beur permet, au delà de la découverte d'une culture confisquée, l'éclatement des contradictions d'une société."[78]

In addition, the fact that Shérazade and her squat friends do not read *Le Monde* but opt to read papers like *Sans Frontière* is a very powerful message from Sebbar. This paper was first considered the "journal des immigrés" and later was called "hebdomadaire de l'immigration et du tiers monde." "Diffusé sur l'ensemble du territoire français et dans quelques pays africains, le journal [*Sans*

[77] Michel Laronde, "La 'Mouvance beure': émergence médiatique," *The French Review* 161(5) (April 1988): 687.
[78] Ibid.

Frontière] est le porte-parole de la France multiraciale et pluriculturelle."[79] By including all these radiostations and newspapers, Sebbar is making it "cool" to take part in this "Arabness" within French society, dissuading the youth from attempting to efface it once out of an HLM.

Another development happening in the early 80s which Sebbar refers to several times is the emergence of Beur rock groups like "Carte de séjour" and "Rock against the Police." Coming from the banlieue in Lyon, the group "Carte de séjour" was the first one to appear on the scene singing both in French and Arabic.[80] At one point in Sebbar's novel, some members of the squat are talking about starting their own rock group and Rachid suggests imitating "Carte de séjour" which incorporates several ethnicities:

> Alors, les Beurs on singe *Carte de séjour*? Il vous faut un chanteur arabe. Moi je chante; je sais pas très bien l'arabe, je suis kabyle, mais je peux faire un mélange…Tout le monde sera content. On y va? (*S* 163)

In *Carnets*, Sebbar describes in detail the rags to riches story of "Carte de séjour" which Shérazade calls, "un groupe rockarabe, rockmétèque" (*CS* 148). At a concert that Shérazade and Gilles attend, the young musicians are wearing a very mixed attire "mêlant avec discernement et grâce, chéchia, turban, battle-dress, jean, smoking, bolero, saroual, débardeur à mailles, borsalino, ceinture cloutée, lunettes noires, mains de Fatma…" (*CS* 155) Gilles doesn't understand why these

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[79] Ibid

[80] It is interesting to note how involved Sebbar has been in the Beur mouvement since the group *Carte de séjour* made its debut the same year this book was published!

guys "se déguisent comme ça," and Shérazade is quick to explain to him that they are not "déguisés" but that "c'est leur manière, c'est leur look" (*CS* 158-159).

> Tu comprends…les habits traditionnels de leurs grands-pères turcs, arabes, berbères, africains sont à eux et les habits européens sont à tout le monde et eux, leur look, c'est de tout mélanger, mais pas n'importe comment, c'est très étudié. (*CS* 159)

This explanation from Shérazade not only explains to a French audience the complexity of this rock group but it celebrates its message of coexistance and acceptance serving as a role model for the rest of France.

Besides the presence of all these emerging media of the 80s, there is also the presence of the creative linguistic phenomena of *verlan*. Verlan is an alteration of French by switching syllables and creating new words like the word *beur,* which comes from the word *arabe*. Also*, femme* becomes *meuf, mec* becomes *keum,* etc. The ability of these young people to switch from French to verlan and back (not to mention Arabic) is another example of their nomadic reterritorialization. It is mostly associated with the banlieue and gangs as a sort of code or secret language, but again in *Shérazade*, it is its presence outside of the banlieue that reinforces the idea of a new linguistic "territory" being created in Paris and even in rural France. The most recent development, which shows the vitality and cross-culturality of this phenomenon, is the new word *reub* that has replaced the word *beur*. This "reverlanisation" not only reflects a new generation vis à vis the Beur parents, but also the word can be pronounced in English (R-AB) if split up making the new *reub* identity even more complex. With the French

government's attempt of keeping the French language "pure" by rejecting the use of English words, the possibility of this word being Anglicized ads another rebellious dimension to this practice.

In addition to the switching from verlan to French, we also find constant changes of narrators as well as tangents within a given narrator's story. These narrative techniques are present in both *Shérazade* novels and serve to give voice and power to very different characters. For example, in the first book we are able to experience Driss's pain first hand as Sebbar allows him to recount his conflict with his Moroccan father who left his mother for a French woman (*S* 50-53). This four page outpouring has no ponctuation and is full of bitterness and anger – feelings shared by many young Beurs living in French cities. Sebbar wants to make the reader aware of the boiling pot that exists in today's HLMs as she explains:

> Les enfants de l'immigration feront violence à la France comme elle à fait violence à leurs pères ici et là-bas. Ils auront, avec la France, une histoire d'amour mêlée de haine, perverse et souvent meurtrière. (*S* 60)

We see this violent nature in most of the personal anecdotes of the young "immigrés" in the first book. The many narrative tangents allow readers to get to know and understand the complexity involved in the intersection and the in-betweenness of different cultures sharing the same space. We are introduced (just to name a few) to Julien's family's pied-noir experience in Nédroma, Algeria during the French Occupation (*S* 15-25); to the militant and violent Pierrot who

"ne parlait pas la langue de son père" who is Polish (*S* 42); to the dandy Basile from Guadeloupe who changes his name to Louis or Bob "comme Armstrong ou comme Marley" to be popular with French women (*S* 60) but who at the same time wants to go to Africa to find "une vraie femme"; to Véro's racist mother, "une Oranaise d'origine espagnole" (S 143) who hates Arabs and rejects her daughter's boyfriend Rachid; to Djamila, an Algerian prostitute "coupée en deux" (half Algerian/half French) who continuously wants to return to Algeria (*S* 80).

FEMININE SPACES

The squat not only introduces Shérazade to these "new" Beur and immigrant experiences, but her fellow squaters are very knowledgeable in different areas and have a lot to teach her. For example, Basile tells her about "l'histoire des nègres, de la déportation, des révoltes d'esclaves, la première à Saint-Domingue. Basile lui prêta des livres sur l'Afrique noire, les Antilles, Toussaint Louverture…" (*S* 87). But most importantly for Shérazade and any "Beurette" reading this novel are the references and tales about strong women, both European and non-European, which offer many role models from different backgrounds. For example, Basile talks about German and Italian female terrorists who can use guns as well or better than men (*S* 45), Pierrot reminds us of the importance of women in many wars of liberation or independence like "les combattantes vietnamiennes et algériennes [qui] s'étaient retrouvées privées de la

liberté et de l'égalité pour lesquelles elles s'étaient battues," (*S* 45-46) and there are numerous references to strong women throughout history like Flora Tristan, famous 19th century writer and socialist; Rosa Luxembourg, a late 19th century German socialist leader and revolutionary; Kahina, queen of the Berbers who converted to Judaism to escape Islam; Zingha, 18th century Angolan queen who dazzled and terrified the Portuguese colonizers; the famous Egyptian singer Oum Kalthoum and many others.

In addition to all these famous women, Shérazade herself is a strong, modern woman who since her childhood refused to conform to oppressive definitions of women. Early in the novel, upon hearing the word "squatt," Shérazade recalls playing cowboys and Indians with her brothers who always forced her to be the "squaw." Her brothers insisted that a squaw had to stay close to the tent with the children and the other women, and that it was absolutely prohibited for her to come near the river. Shérazade refuses to conform and "s'était sauvée, avait franchi les limites du camp" (*S* 27) causing her brothers to never want to play with her again. Once out of her house, the territory where this kind of discourse exists, she will continue to "franchir les limites" and move from space to space reterritorializing female identity for the immigrant woman.

Regarding Sebbar's novels, François Lionnet asserts that "her original contribution is to have made immigrant women – doubly marginalized by their womanhood and their Arab background – the very center of a work that

problematizes the entire visual and discursive tradition of European Orientalism."[81] In effect, the women Shérazade associates with are mostly of immigrant descent although in *Carnets* she does have several encounters with French women. Regardless of ethnic background, Shérazade only meets strong women who in their own way manage to be in control of their destiny. For example, Djamila, an Algerian at the squat, and Safia, a maid working at a motel, are both prostitutes who use men for money and value themselves regardless of their profession, as Djamila explains:

> Je te dis que c'est moi qui me sers d'eux et si tu veux savoir, je trouve que les filles qui couchent avec les mecs pour pas un rond, c'est des salopes qui se donnent pour rien, qui ont même pas pensé que leur corps a une valeur. (*S* 89-90)

The same exact argument is echoed in *Carnets* by Safia who, in addition to this belief has ambitious goals considering her maid status: "J'aurai un commerce, je serai la patronne et ça marchera" (*CS* 250). The discussions between these young women open up a dialogue that offers the reader different sides and shows that things are not so clear cut. Shérazade often questions them about the nature of their job, opening the door to a back and forth debate which doesn't ever have a clear resolution. At this "in-between" space is where female identity is reassessed and negotiated.

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[81] Françoise Lionnet, "Narrative Strategies and Postcolonial Identity In Contemporary France: Leïla Sebbar's *Les Carnets de Shérazade," Writing New Identities: Gender, Nation, and Immigration In Contemporary Europe* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 66.

Another tension Shérazade encounters and merely observes is that of the fervently politically involved France and Esther and the detached, materialistic Zouzou. France is a gorgeous Martinican woman who refuses to accept any modeling offers and Esther is an African journalist exiled in Paris who works at Radio France International and runs a "journal afro-antillais" together with other women. The fact that France meets Esther at the Frantz Fanon Memorial is an indication of their political involvement and ambiguous position within French society.

On the other hand, the Tunisian Zouzou hates politics and her closet is a "vraie boutique." When France accuses her of being "pervertie à vie par Babylone" (*S* 213) and will probably end up as a call-girl, Zouzou defends herself:

> Je peux quand même m'éclater et vivre ma vie, être super-cool sans pleurer tout le temps sur les immigrés, le tiers monde et tout ça… C'est pas la politique qui va me donner à bouffer de toute façon. (*S* 213)

In addition she accuses France of ruining everything with her "leçons de militante qui ne milite même pas" (*S* 214).

During all these discussions, Shérazade like the reader is a silent observer, and the movement from one argument to the other again opens up an "in-between" space where differences are negotiated with various views and positions resulting. There is never any definite judgement leaving the argument open-ended with infinite possibilities.

Nevertheless, regardless of their differences, Zouzou and France are inseparable and share the same passion for dressing up very creatively to be noticed by others. They create their "look" just like *Carte de séjour*, "sans se déguiser," putting different styles together to continuously re-invent themselves. They use the fancy clothes "marque italo-américaine" from the boutique they work at and combine them "avec d'autres qu'elles trouvaient aux Puces chez Josselyne et dans les stocks neufs des années cinquante" (*S* 119). This "look pas possible," (*S* 152) as their friends describe it, becomes coveted by French photographers and designers who are eager to stay up to date with the latest fashion trends that could inspire a "prêt à porter pas cher qui se vendrait bien" (*S* 117). For this reason, their "bande de jeunes métèques" gets invited to fancy bourgeois parties where both the young people and the photographers put on performances, which in Mildred Woodhull's opinion stage "a series of struggles over the means of representation in French culture, indicating how immigrant youths *move* to position themselves as subjects, rather than objects, in the production and circulation of images that shape their cultural identity."[82]

This continuous movement from their everyday life towards this luxury or fantasy world helps them forget the immigrant reality of "les heures de queue à l'A.N.P.E., les heures debout dans les boutiques du Forum, les heures passées dans l'odeur écœurante des croissants chauds et tartelettes qu'on débitait à toute

[82] Mildred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and*

allure pour les banlieusards des R.E.R." (*S* 118).[83] Sebbar also makes a clear contrast between the two worlds when she describes the luxury and the décor of the apartments where these parties take place.

It is in this shifting of worlds that self-perceptions and fantasies, or misrepresentations, collide, and fantasies are continuously interrupted and disarmed in more ways than one. For example, as Shérazade, France and Zouzou are dancing under a palm tree to the music France has demanded, the other guests stop to watch them like they are some curiosity "formant un cercle aussi compact que ceux de l'esplanade de Beaubourg autour des tambours africains ou marocains" (*S* 123). At this point, it seems as if the girls are being viewed as exotic objects, yet this fantasy becomes quickly disarmed when it is the onlookers who become the object of ridicule:

> Ils avaient tout à coup l'air de touristes ou de provinciaux en promenade dans le ventre de Paris… L'un d'eux fit la remarque, ils s'enfuirent en débandade dans les coins de la pièce ou sur les balcons vides. (S 123)

This shifting in control from the girls being used as entertainment to the onlookers becoming their victims again is exposed when one onlooker almost faints "en syncope aux pieds de Shérazade" after having embarrassed her with Orientalist comments like these: "C'est du cinéma ou quoi… La fille du grand vizir sous un

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Literatures, (University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota; London: 1993), 117. My emphasis.

[83] A.N.P.E.: Agence Nationale pour l'Emploi; the R.E.R. is the subway train that brings commuters from the banlieue into the city of Paris.

palmier…Je rêve…" (*S* 124). This scene eventually attracts all the famous designers and photographers who "s'agitaient tous autour de Shérazade comme groupies sur un podium" (*S* 124). The photographers' fantasies are interrupted by the reality of this woman's power, whenever she realizes how she is being perceived and as a result destroys one of their very expensive cameras. In turn, trying to regain his subject position of power, the photographer reacts with racist remarks: ("et qu'elles retournent dans leur pays ces petites garces") only to be ostracized by his party friends who do not want to be associated with this sort of racist behavior: "Il s'était retrouvé seul, son appareil gravement mutilé" (*S* 125). This last remark clearly exposes these women's ability to defend themselves and "castrate"/reject any man (by mutilating his apparatus) who tries to objectify them.

Another similar yet more complicated castration scene is that of a porno photographer who wants the three girls, "des beautés exotiques," to pose for him in a "jungle" scene. He thinks he is in control of the photo shoot making them wear exotic animal costumes and ordering them to not be shy but to pose erotically. "Mais dégagez-vous bien qu'on voie les seins, les fesses, il faut pas être pudibondes. Si vous étiez dans un sauna ou un hammam puisque c'est la mode, vous seriez toutes nues ça ne vous gênerait pas…" (*S* 154).

To this Orientalist fantasy he adds some machine guns, "des vraies pas chargées" so they can look like "guérillères". But his fantasy world quickly gets

interrupted when the girls turn on him and point *their* own guns, fake ones, causing the photographer to surrender thinking they are real. Again the idea of reality vs. misrepresentation is exposed when the surprised photographer's angry questions ("Qu'est ce que c'est que ce cinéma? Où vous vous croyez?") are returned with a firm "C'est pas du cinéma. C'est des P.38" (*S* 155). The fantasy guérillères become real ones imitating "les Brigades rouges" but with fake guns that have more power than the real thing.

With regards to strong powerful women, like these three, Sebbar comments in *Lettres parisiennes*, that she greatly admires women who are "excentriques, en marge, rebelles, guerrières ou aventurières, en exil de leur sexe, de leur milieu social, de leur terre natale, de leur religion…, de leur condition de femme" (*LP* 61). This description perfectly can be used to describe Shérazade who will not conform to any fixed "condition de femme" and in her case "condition de femme exotique." Throughout the entire novel, Sebbar subversively denounces exotic, Orientalist images of immigrant girls, which have been reinforced for centuries and continue to be pushed by the media, and can lead to the seeking of these girls for pornography or prostitution. For example, when Gilles is observing "des albums de photographies coloniales" with naked Moorish women lounged on "divans," he immediately makes the following connection: "Dans les sex-shops, on propose souvent des négresses et des Orientales pour les amateurs…Des femmes et des petites filles" (*CS* 89). Later on

the same page, when he is thinking of Shérazade sleeping on the red "divan" in the back of his truck, he wonders "pourquoi il pense à des revues pornos juste-là, maintenant." Sebbar again more subtely mentions pictures of Arab women "decoupées dans Paris-Match" (*CS* 185), which a restaurant owner has displayed on his walls, again in exotic stereotypical poses.[84]

The gap between reality and the representation of reality is also expressed through Julien's obsession with *pictures* of Arab women. Shérazade exposes the fact that he doesn't really love *them*, but that he loves them "en peinture" to which he agrees (*S* 98). For this reason, Shérazade ends up tearing all the pictures Julien had taken of her since they don't really represent her, but *his* idea or fantasy of her: "J'en ai marre de voir ma gueule partout, tu comprends… tu as pas besoin de moi vivante finalement…" (*S* 158).

Nevertheless, she initially accepts the role of "Zina" in Julien's friend's movie simply because she participates in the writing of the script with Julien. The character of Zina is described by the director as "une chef de bande, une rebelle et poète, une insoumise habile au couteau, efficace en karaté (comme sa première héroïne taxi), intrépide et farouche, une mutante des Z.U.P., une vagabonde des blocs, des caves, des parkings et des rues, imprenable et redoubtable comme un chef de guerre…" (*S* 219)[85] and he goes on and on. Ironically he explains that he

[84] For a study on photographs of Algerian women and girls taken during the colonial period see Malek Alloula's *Le harem colonial: Images d'un sous-érotisme* (Paris: Slatkine, 1981).
[85] Z.U.P means "Zone à urbaniser par priorité" and refers to the public housing projects reserved for poor immigrants.

wanted someone who "échapperait à tous les stéréotypes," yet the only reason Shérazade is casted without even an audition is because of her green eyes and her exotic look. Later we find out that Zina "voulait dire jolie en arabe" (*S* 219) and slowly Shérazade begins to realize this is not what she had in mind. Once she sees herself on TV, she feels "bizarre, comme s'il ne s'agissait pas d'elle. Celle qu'elle voyait n'était pas elle" (*S* 219). As the director insists that Shérazade *is* Zina and repeats this several times, her discomfort level increases. It reaches its limit when she happens to see a book entitled *Femmes algériennes 1960,* which consists of pictures by a French photographer, Marc Garanger, of Algerian female detainees after they've been forced to remove their veils. In Woodhull's analysis of these pictures, she asserts that "the dishevelment and disarray of the women photographed bespeak contempt and defiance as much as discouragement and defeat."[86] The power of these images move Shérazade to tears when she realizes she is betraying her own and thus refuses to continue with the film:

> Ces Algériennes avaient toutes devant l'objectif-mitrailleur, le même regard, intense, farouche, d'une sauvagerie que l'image ne saurait qu'archiver, sans jamais la maîtriser ni la dominer. Ces femmes parlaient toutes la même langue, la langue de sa mère. (*S* 220)

Shérazade decides to honor these women by interrupting yet again an attempt to objectify her and all Arab women.

[86] Woodhull 43.

Another way Shérazade challenges repressive definitions of women is by crossing into spaces where she is not supposed or expected to be. Besides the squat and her friends' apartments, she spends most of her time at the Municipal Library where it doesn't even cross her family's mind to look for her:

> Ses frères aînés l'avaient cherchée. Ils étaient allés partout où ils avaient entendu dire que les fugueuses des cites immigrées, des Arabes, se retrouvaient. Ils avaient pensé à tout, à la drogue, à la prostitution mais jamais à la bibliothèque de Beaubourg. (*S* 70)

Not only does she "invade" this forbidden space of higher learning, but she also "conquers" it or reterritorializes it by influencing the contents of its shelves. She prefers to read books by Maghrebian authors like Feraoun, Dib, Boudjedra, Djebar, Farès, Haddad, Yacine, Ben Jelloun and many others, books that "les Français ne lisaient jamais parce qu'ils ne les connaissaient pas ou parce que tout ce qui n'était pas du Patrimoine ne les intéressait pas" (*S* 97). This sentiment is confirmed when police inspectors question the librarian and have no idea of who these authors are. Nevertheless, Shérazade has already made her mark on this public space:

> C'est grâce à Shérazade et à d'autres lycéennes comme elle, que j'ai ces étagères sur l"Afrique du Nord… elles ne sont pas reservées, de plus en plus de lecteurs d'Aulnay, des Français, prennent des livres qu'ils n'auraient pas eu l'idée de demander avant. (*S* 133)

Consequently, by having her intrepid "fugueuse" cross into this territory, Sebbar has both challenged female Beur identity as well as French identity, since most of

the postcolonial writers listed by the librarian will expose a very different world to this new audience.

ORIENTALIST SPACES

Another public space Shérazade explores in her flight is the Louvre Museum. Again, she is crossing into a territory where people from her other worlds, like her squat friends, would not accept her presence. She does not share with them her passion for art because she is certain they wouldn't understand and would even accuse her "de bourgeoise ou de touriste":

> Elle se serait sentie insultée, ils se seraient disputés et elle ne les aurait peut-être plus revus. Pour eux, la peinture de musée c'était la culture bourgeoise pourrie, l'Occident décadent, c'était vieux, rassis, mort… (*CS* 238)

The one person she can share this love with is her friend Julien, a pied-noir intellectual who grew up in Algeria and is very knowledgeable in North African history and Orientalism, and like Sebbar "était curieux de tout ce qui constituait du plus loin de l'histoire, sa propre histoire et celle de deux peuples, deux cultures qui se fréquentaient depuis les croisades" (*S* 113). He shares his knowledge with Shérazade, especially that of Orientalist paintings and odalisques, which he is an expert at.

However, even if he wears his "écharpe palestinienne" and supports his friend's magazine *Combat pour la diaspora* (*S* 148), Julien is not at all in touch

with the modern realities of the Beurs. There are a couple of instances where his dislike for the Beurs seems to "slip" out, even though he adores "traditional" Arab things. At one time he "pestait parce qu'on ne trouvait plus France-Musique avec ces radios libres trop près" (*S* 91), and at another time he angrily yells at Shérazade because she doesn't like his music:

> Julien se mettait en colère et l'envoyait écouter d'autres merdes dans les sous-sols-parkings de Crimée, un rock urbain qui lui conviendrait mieux, dans une tour de Babel, du béton sonorisé par des métèques musicos. (*S* 230)

He is stuck in a world of "archives de la civilisation et littérature arabes" (*S* 113), and from the first page of *Shérazade*, we know he is very familiar with the Orient of "il y a un siècle" (*S* 7). Shérazade accuses him of always thinking "cent ans en arrière" when she refuses to give into his Orientalist fantasy of photographing her in an exotic setting (*S* 199).

Regarding Orientalist art and fantasies, Said asserts that "what is commonly circulated by it is not 'truth' but representations,"[87] and it is this "exotisme d'artifice" (*S* 75) that Julien is obsessed with. He is aware of how he has been influenced by this art which, in Said's opinion, creates "an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex."[88] For example, we see this dynamics as he is thinking of Manet's *Olympia* painting, which "le mettait si mal à l'aise":

> Il se dit qu'il fallait en finir avec ce trouble étrange qui lui faisait battre le cœur, chaque fois qu'il voyait dans le tableau orientaliste ces deux figures,

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[87] Said *Orientalism* 21.
[88] Ibid 188.

> si présentes dans la peinture occidentale du XIXe siècle, la Noire et la Blanche. (*S* 75)

In addition, the Orientalist attitudes towards the women represented on the paintings are clearly expressed by Julien when he describes an odalisque to Shérazade who has never heard of these women:

> Elles sont toujours allongées, alanguies, le regard vague, presque endormies…Elles évoquent pour les peintres de l'Occident la nonchalance, la lascivité, la séduction perverse des femmes orientales. (*S* 190)

Said equates the passivity of these women with the West's perception of both the "Orient's" women and the "Orient" itself as passive, an attitude which eventually would justify their colonization. Nevertheless, Shérazade will not be "colonized" by Julien as she clearly lets him know in a note: "Je ne suis pas une odalisque" (*S* 206).

However, through the character of Julien, Sebbar not only attacks Orientalism as Said does, but she also exposes monolithic views, like Said's, of colonial discourse. The first infiltration of Orientalism is through the contrast of Shérazade's experiences with the paintings Julien introduces to her and to the reality of Arab women living in France today. The first time she is introduced to Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger,* she becomes as obsessed with them as Julien. She could care less about seeing other paintings, and with Julien they run around in the museum "sans rien voir d'autre que ces femmes parce qu'ils venaient pour elles, uniquement" (*S* 13). The first thing she notices about the painting is the

green eyes of one of the women. As Anne Donadey has pointed out regarding this detail: "Sebbar thus foregrounds the long history of *métissage* in the Maghreb between Berbers, Arabs, and Europeans. Like Shérazade, the women of Algiers are also métisses."[89] Besides this connection, making the contrast between these women and Shérazade who is the antithesis of passive, clearly alters the Orientalist perception of these women's availability.

Another way Sebbar juxtaposes the painting with the reality of Arab women in France is by following the museum episode with that of "le jour de la couture." Every Thursday, Shérazade's mother invites all of her female friends and family to their apartment to sew. Again, the idea of passivity gets challenged, since "elles cousaient toutes un peu et ce jour-là l'appartement devenait un ouvroir" (*S* 200). This day is strictly an "Arab" experience since "on cousait en arabe pour une mode arabe et dans des tissues arabes que seules les femmes de l'immigration maghrébine portaient" (*S* 201). Both Shérazade and her sister participate in this event and know all the names of the different materials these women use. They also know exactly "ce qu'évoquaient chacun de ces noms, les couleurs, les motifs, la souplesse ou la transparence et jusqu'à la forme de la robe" (*S* 202). Undoubtedly, the painting, with the rich colors of the women's dresses, has clearly made Shérazade think of the Thursday "couturières" since it is on the Thursday following a visit to *Femmes d'Alger* that she contacts her mother

[89] Anne Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing Between Worlds* (Portsmouth, NH:

and sister for the first time since her "fugue."[90] The two women have to wait for all the "jour de la couture" guests to leave and even for the rest of the family to go to bed so they can secretly listen to the tape Shérazade has sent. They go to the bathroom with the excuse of giving Mériem, the sister, a "henné" or henna treatment.

These every-day activities (the henna body tattooing and the sewing gathering) show the kind of culture that exists in the Maghrebi community today in France. They are far from being "nonchalant" or seductive, and there are several other similar connections made to Orientalist paintings throughout the novel (*S* 13, *CS* 152, *CS* 234, *CS 253*). Yet the most powerful parallel to and "deteritorrialization" of Orientalism takes place during Shérazade's nomadic journey through France. At one point she stops in Lyon at a "cité" called les Minguettes to look for Farid's mother to give her news about him, and the immensity and sterility of these H.L.M.s is clearly expressed: "Les Minguettes, c'était pas un espace vert où on venait se promener le dimanche en famille, ni un point de vue panoramique, ni un zoo, ni un cirque" (*CS* 149). After dealing with the problem of not knowing his last name and there being hundreds of Farids there, she finally finds Farid's apartment, and it is here where Sebbar sharply criticizes the immigrant situation in France. Out of the blue, at Farid's apartment,

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Heinemann, 2001) 108.

[90] This same connection is made in *Carnets* when Shérazade attends a Moroccan wedding and sees the women's beautiful dresses. She again tries to contact her mother . (*CS* 251)

Shérazade recalls Gauguin's *La Femme au perroquet* and how everyone loves "les femmes orientales de la peinture française, les esclaves blanches des harems, oisives et belles, dans le luxe des parfums et de la soie, languides et comme endormies" (*CS* 152). Immediately Sebbar questions the relevance of the obsession with these women to those of the real world:

> Et les femmes d'Orient en France, dans les cités au bord des capitales, sa mère, la mère de Farid, les mères du Nord à Douai, Roubaix, Tourcoing, Lens, dans le froid et la brique grise et noire comme le lui avait raconté Néfissa à Marseille? (*CS* 152)

Julien's teachings on Orientalist paintings and literature have not only opened her eyes to these works Julien loves so much, but also to the immigrant reality of the present. At one point, they are discussing Gautier's 1843 *Voyage pittoresque en Algérie* which brings up the issue of Arab immigrants in France. In his chronicles, Gautier writes: "Nous croyons avoir conquis Alger, et c'est Alger qui nous a conquis" because the French women are dressing in Arab clothing. He goes as far as saying that in no time "la France sera mahométane." (*CS* 191). These comments lead to the discussion of the Arab presence in France, and at first Julien seems rational about the issue, saying that he does believe "que la France se métisse." He goes on to list different immigrant groups moving into France, but finally falls into the Orientalist trap again by blaming Arab women for this very "métissage" as if they are throwing themselves at the Frenchmen: "Tout ça à cause de filles comme toi…":

> Parce que c'est vous qui allez faire des enfants bicolores, des sangs mêlés, des mixtes, des coupes, des bâtards…des hybrides…des travestis…(*S* 191-192)

Even though he does start saying this "en riant", there is a tone of resentment that clearly comes out. However, Shérazade stops this attack on its tracks by firmly stating that she will not have any children but will remain free from any objectification.

Besides connecting Julien to Orientalism in the negative, objectifying way, Sebbar does use him as well to show how for Shérazade, and Sebbar herself, these works are essential in the tracing of origins. Sebbar admits this need in another letter to Huston: "Ce que je connais de la civilisation et de la culture arabo-islamique, je le sais par les livres en français" (*S* 149). Said has a point attacking Orientalism, but the world these artists were rendering as well as the present situation in France is *not* completely oppositional and one-sided. The character of Julien Desrosier, the only character Sebbar admits to identify with,[91] is the clear example of this complexity and the writer goes to great trouble to show this. There are two entire chapters dedicated to explaining his family's life in Algeria and how attached they all were to this land. Not only does Julien tell Shérazade everything he knows about the world represented in the paintings, but he also has personal anecdotes to share:

> Il racontait à Shérazade les femmes des harems, l'Afrique du Nord de Delacroix et de Fromentin, les ouvriers agricoles arabes et les petits colons

[91] See Hugon 36.

> qu'il avait connus en Algérie, les enfants des rues avec qui il avait toujours joué.

With regards to both Djebar and Sebbar's work, Anne Donadey asserts that the complexity of these writers' work is what makes them *post*colonial writers rather than anticolonial. "With brutal honesty, they expose all the layers of the colonial encounter and its aftermath to underscore the impossibility of complete oppositionality in the postcolonial context."[92]

Julien's complexity can also be seen in the titles of the novel. Sebbar includes his last name on two chapters, and in both chapters entitled *Julien Desrosiers*, he obsesses over Shérazade and objectifies her as he stares at her for hours just like an odalisque in a painting. During the following chapters up to the point when his last name is dropped in the titles, he interrupts her short personal narratives of Algeria, which are never told in the first person, and silences her with his vast historical knowledge.

On the other hand, the first chapter entitled simply *Julien* is a key moment in Sebbar's and this character's "gathering of divisions" as two different yet similar worlds come together to learn from each other.

> Julien apprenait des mots de l'arabe littéraire à Shérazade et elle lui faisait répéter des phrases en arabe dialectal algérien, la langue qu'elle parlait avec sa mère... Shérazade racontait à Julien des histoires populaires algériennes qu'il ne connaissait pas. (*S* 146-147)

[92] Donadey 107

She shares as well personal stories about her grandfather and his experience during the Algerian War – stories Julien would never find in one of his books. In addition, the fact that they are able to amuse themselves with each other's accents and "rire ensemble de leurs maladresses" (*S* 146) helps remove any "walls" of self-defense that could block their mutual learning experience.[93]

In the other chapter entitled *Julien*, Julien realizes Shérazade/the odalisque is gone as he finds himself alone in his apartment and the one page chapter ends with him falling asleep "sans rêver de Shérazade." (*S* 248) Her "fugue" and the "loss" of his last name, free him of his preconceptions of the Orient so he may join the other *métis*, who only go by their first names like Shérazade, in creating a new (self) image/identity. The continuation of her nomadism also brings Shérazade back to the Beaubourg museum where she is alone this time facing a painting that will push her definitely to continue her search. As she observes Matisse's *Odalisque à la culotte rouge*, Shérazade does not understand "pourquoi ça l'émeut" (*CS* 245). Just like the woman of *Femmes d'Alger* has green eyes like her, this woman has a red "culotte" just like Shérazade. Even though the meaning of the word "culotte" is not the same today as in the 19th century, the insistance on Shérazade's red underwear throughout the novel (*S* 130, *S* 233, *S* 251) clearly forces the connection. The fact that these panties are stolen reminds us of Shérazade's rebellious nature, which again destabilizes the idea of the passive odalisque. She has to continue her voyage to understand the origin of these constructs, which have not only influenced Julien but her as well. She doesn't

[93] Azouz Begag believes humor is extremely important in the mutual understanding and tolerance of different cultures.

understand why “cette femme l’a touchée” so profoundly, and thus explains to her friends the reason of her voyage to Algeria: “C’est à cause d’elle que je m’en vais”. (*CS* 252)

LA FRANCE PROFONDE

Before continuing on the quest for *her* Algeria, Shérazade leaves behind her mother’s jewels. She leaves Julien a note asking him to take care of them (the jewels), that she had left them “dans la bibliothèque, derrière les albums de *La Guerre d’Algérie* ou de *La France rurale*” (*S* 235), she can’t remember which one. With this gesture, she is not necessarily leaving behind her family ties, but is definitely embarking in a less personal and more universal journey. The two books she choses to leave behind are also symbols of what she will be deterritorializing: the history of Franco-Arab relations and the idea of a “pure” rural France, or France profonde.

It is in this “France profonde,” in Orléans, where Shérazade finally finds herself ALONE to set off on her quest. Julien had insisted on going with her, but she had firmly opposed: "Je veux aller en Algérie seule, SEULE, tu entends?" (*S* 232). It is at this moment of solitude that she is able to gain control of the “pen” and add *her* story and that of all the Beur to history in *Les Carnets de Shérazade*. In this novel, Shérazade is traveling throughout France following the route of the two month 1983 Beur March which went to several cities calling for an end to

racism and advocating a program of equality for immigrants. So her voyage to "Algeria" becomes both a connection to the present Beur reality as well as to the past since the French countryside and the rural population bring her back to rural Algeria and to her childhood memories. Rural France is not much different from rural Algeria, and as Mildred Mortimer points out, "In fact, a subtext of this novel is the affinity between these superficially dissimilar worlds."[94] France isn't the homogenous society it may claim to be, and Shérazade's travels unveil a much more complex reality.

Carnets begins after Shérazade has completed half of her journey and finds herself at the docks of Marseille "où se mélangeaient les couleurs, les vêtements, les langues depuis des millénaires" (*CS* 13). From the beginning, Sebbar prepares us for Shérazade's "lessons" both to the truck driver Gilles and to herself. She will learn that *her* "H/histoire" is also Gilles' though she initially thinks this retracing of the Beur March, or "gathering" of divisions, is only hers and has nothing to do with him: "Pourquoi il connaîtrait ce mot bizarre qu'il n'avait peut-être jamais entendu: Beurs…C'était pas son histoire ou bien il s'en foutait complètement" (*CS* 21-22).

Unlike the first novel, here the importance of time or History is immediately presented with the division of chapters in the seven days of the week. The titles of the first novel were names of young immigrants intertwined with names of Orientalist painters, of Algerian villages (Nédroma and Bouzaréa) and Parisian suburbs (Vanves, Bobigny), as well one entitled "Algérie" and the last

[94] Mildred Mortimer, "On the Road: Leïla Sebbar's Fugitive Heroines," *Research in African Literatures* 23.2 (Summer 1992): 200.

one entitled "Orléans" where *Shérazade 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* ends and where Shérazade begins documenting *her* carnets. These titles and location changes take the reader into his/her own nomadic reterritorialization, as all facets of Beur and French life are laid out in no particular hierarchical order of importance. "J'écris sans méthode" explains Sebbar in a letter to Huston (*LP* 30), and the sudden changes of titles and experiences leave the reader feeling the in-betweenness of the characters, of the writer and in some cases of oneself.

Even though the titles in *Carnets* give the impression that things will be in chronological order, the incredible intertwining of present and past within a given "day" clearly expose the complexity of human relations and particularly that of the French and Arab peoples. The present consists of Shérazade and Gilles' dialogue in the truck as they make their way through France, and the past is Shérazade's recounting of both History and her personal experiences during her journey up to their meeting in Marseille. This division can also be made by separating Sebbar's *Carnets,* or her "Histoire" lesson, and Shérazade's "carnets" or diary of her "histoire" she is sharing with Gilles.

This narrative strategy goes beyond establishing "a dialogue between 'high' and 'low' culture, between the written record and popular experience."[95] It destabilizes the very notion of history as linear and unified since Sebbar's work reflects what Pierre Nora calls the "acceleration of history," an expresion asserting that " the most continuous and permanent phenomenon is not

[95] Françoise Lionnet, "Narrative Strategies and Postcolonial Identity In Contemporary France: Leïla Sebbar's *Les Carnets de Shérazade*," *Writing New Identites: Gender, Nation, and Immigration In Contemporary Europe*, Gisela Brinker-Gabler and Sidonie Smith eds. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 75.

permanence and continuity but rather change."[96] This constant change from present to past is Shérazade's attempt at remembering and thus constructiong her won history by means of "traces". "[The past] only communicates with us in the form of traces – traces, moreover, which are mysterious and which we examine because they contain precisely the secret of what we are, of our identity."[97] Thus, Shérazade gathers as many "traces" as possible through her memories and the reading of books "qui racontaient une vielle histoire, l'histoire de sa mémoire en miettes, et une histoire nouvelle, moderne où se croisent les continents et les civilisations, une histoire qui serait la sienne" (*CS* 129). Her history is a Beur history, one that exists, yet is continuously being re-assessed and re-invented through memory. Throughout the journey, Gilles accuses Shérazade repeatedly of "inventing" her stories (*CS* 71, *CS* 75, *CS* 94) and of never finishing them (*CS* 131). Both the invention and open-endedness of the narratives are Sebbar's strategy to reflect the subjectivity and construction of such concepts as history, nation, nationality, and national identity.

These concepts are continuously re-negotiated in the in-between space created from the constant shifting from present to past both at the "present"-time narrator/Sebbar level and within Shérazade's own anecdotes. For example, one of the literary works Shérazade carries with her throughout her nomadic journey is Flora Tristan's *Le Tour de France II*, which both the narrator and Shérazade draw upon. The narrator makes connections between Tristan and the protagonist, like

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[96] Pierre Nora, "Memory and Collective Identity," paper presented at "The future of the past - remembering and forgetting on the threshold of the new millennium," 13th Sinclair House Debate, November 12-13 1999. See website www.h-quandt-stiftung.de/english/kolloq/13.htm. for text.
[97] Ibid.

at the moment when Tristan's proclamation that her "patrie, c'est l'univers" reminds Shérazade of her brother who similarly said: "je suis pas d'ici, ni du pays de mon père; je suis du monde" (*CS* 113). At one point, the reader cannot distinguish between Tristan and the protagonist: "Elle (?) sera bientôt à Lyon. On est en 1844, mai-juin" (*CS* 113), and their journeys become intertwined. As she approaches Lyon with Gilles, Shérazade reads a passage about Tristan's in this city more than a century before, and this reminds her of the factory in Aulnay where her father works. Shérazade imagines how Tristan would be treated today, and her thoughts echo those of the 19th century journal:

> Elle imaginait, aujourd'hui, Flora Tristan au milieu de ces hommes, la seule femme… Ils se seraient méfiés. Ils ne seraient pas allés aux réunions qu'elle organisait obstinément pour rencontrer des ouvriers, leur parler… C'était il y a plus d'un siècle, mais elle, dans l'usine de son père n'avait pas vu de femme et le café était un café d'hommes de toutes les couleurs, de toutes les langues, sans femme. (*CS* 126-7)

The "rapprochement" between the France of Tristan and that of the 80's grounds the location, yet the detailed description of the immigrant workers in the Aulnay factory makes the reader aware of the diversity of men working *for* France probably in similar conditions as those denounced by Tristan. In addition, Flora Tristan's racism as she arrives in Marseille brings the reader to present-day France and its racist ideologies:

> Plus je vois cette ville de Marseille et plus elle me déplaît. Cette ville n'est pas française. Il y a ici un ramas de toutes les nations c'est une espèce de Gibraltar, de Barcelone, de Bruxelles, de Nouvelle-Orléans…(*CS* 267)

She goes on to criticize their "moeurs depravées" and pledges to do what she can to "chasser cette corruption de la France" (*CS* 267). The inclusion of this passage by Sebbar is clearly a subtle way to expose Le Pen's current rhetoric regarding immigrants. But what is more remarkable and ironic is the fact that none of the above mentioned "barbare" places would be considered corrupt today, which tricks the French reader into becoming aware of the ignorance and close-mindedness of today's right-wing racist discourses.

Another French figure from the past that accompanies Shérazade is Rimbaud. She shares *Le Roman de Rimbaud l'Africain* and other facts of the writer's life with Gilles who only knew two of Rimbaud's poems. Both the reader and Gilles learn of Rimbaud's life in Ethiopia and his interest in the Arab culture and language. The "assimilation" is remarkable since he spoke Arabic, converted to Islam, "portait une sorte de turban blanc à la manière des Arabes de la région" (*CS* 91), and was even called "Abdo Rinbo" or "Abdallah Rimbaud…serviteur de Dieu" (*CS* 158). Shérazade identifies with Rimbaud's pilgrimage to Abyssinie and uses his writing to connect with Algeria even if "Rimbaud n'est pas allé en Algérie" (*CS* 221). The fact that Rimbaud wrote about Abd el-Kader, an ancestor of Shérazade's family, allows for an extensive lesson on this remarkable man who "a résisté quinze ans à l'armée française." Shérazade recalls her father telling her and her siblings about him, and through

her memories the reader learns about his imprisonment in France and how present this man still is in Algerian's memories today:

> Le père s'interrompait toujours à cet endroit, pour que les enfants écoutent bien, il pointait l'index vers les villes du sud et du sud-ouest de la France et il disait – dans les prisons de ces villes, Toulon, Pau, Toulouse… des femmes ont été détenues, des moudjahidètes, des héroïnes de la guerre de libération…des petites-filles d'Abd el-Kader…Ne l'oubliez jamais… (*CS* 222)

The reader also learns how the émir was treated as "un chef d'Etat" in France, how he was even granted the right to vote for the French emperor, and about his close relationship with Louis-Napoléon who granted him his freedom the same year he was elected emperor. Another remarkable fact is that Abd el-Kader "a protégé la communauté chrétienne d'Orient contre l'arbitraire de certains Turcs musulmans fanatiques" (*CS* 223). This detail included in Shérazade's father's story and his admiration towards his ancestor clearly serves to attack the stereotype of the radical muslim and to give a positive role model to her daughter and the Beur youth. Nevertheless, Sebbar also uses this connection to the past to destabilize or challenge the present as in the following passage immediately following the glorification of Abd el-Kader:

> Un jour, le fils aîné, celui qui partait toujours plus loin, avait demandé à son père pourquoi il travaillait en usine, ici en France et pas dans son pays et pourquoi il vivait dans ces blocs, chez les pauvres, alors qu'il était un descendant de l'émir… (*CS* 224)

The contrast between the treatment of the emir and that of his descendants clearly becomes a dialogue between the past and the present leaving Shérazade and the

reader with a lot of analyzing and negotiating to do regarding colonial oppression and its effects.

Besides her personal anecdotes, Shérazade also underscores that Franco-Arab relations have existed since the Middle Ages. She teaches (or reminds) us that the Arabs occupied the south of France for 300 years. The cross-cultural mixing the right wing is so worried about has been going on for centuries! Sebbar's history lesson on the Arab occupation of France, as Anne Donadey explains, "is not offered to justify French colonization and neocolonialism, but to unsettle French assumptions of superiority over Arab cultures as well as to work against the myth that French identity is based on racial purity."[98]

Shérazade's nomadic, or tangential, storytelling takes us to different episodes in the past where East meets West and where we encounter a sort of reverse Orientalism which turns the tables on the French putting them in the position of "Other." At one point she reads from a travel journal by Mehmed Efendi, Ottoman ambassador from Constantinople to France in the 18th century. Among many other things, Efendi comments on the freedom of French women and on his fascination with their blonde hair, and he only choses to write on the "exotic" France: “Il trouve la France rurale sale et misérable et ne remarque que les châteaux, les palais et les fêtes royales, … les jardins exotiques” (*CS* 181). Bringing her tale to the present, Shérazade explains to Gilles that Efendi

[98] Anne Donadey, “Cultural Métissage,” 260.

happened to have visited the same town where she had stopped once and where many Turks happen to live and work today and who had similar attitudes as those of Efendi:

> Les bûcherons turcs n'adressaient jamais la parole à Helga, l'amie allemande d'André ... Ils regardaient à la dérobée, sans jamais sembler la voir ni même la remarquer, Helga la blonde, fascinés comme le diplomate ottoman deux siècles auparavant, par la couleur d'or de ses cheveux. (*CS* 183)

Nevertheless, she adds that these Turks are probably ignorant about "la pompe de l'ambassadeur de Constantinople": "Quel natif de la Creuse avait un jour entendu parler de l'empire ottoman?" (CS 183). This effacement of memory can explain their present state of poverty and estrangement in France since they refuse to hear Helga's stories about other Turks in Germany but chose to only speak "de la Turquie, pas de leur vie ici" (*CS* 184). Sebbar takes it upon herself to revive these memories even if it implies using "Orientalist" texts which are in their own right, as Dina Sherzer asserts, "des documents ethnographiques qui apprennent à Shérazade [and the reader] ce qu'elle n'avait sans doute jamais appris durant ses études en France, à savoir que les pays du Maghreb sont riches en traditions, que ses ancêtres avaient des coutumes, un savoir-faire, et une élégance remarquables."[99]

The discussion on today's Turks in France leads Shérazade into another tangent: that of lady Mary Montagu, wife of an English ambassador to Istanbul in 1717. This woman also did not discuss the poverty surrounding her but "préférait

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[99] Dina Sherzer, "Effets d'intertextualité dans *Shérazade* et *Les Carnets de Shérazade* de Leïla Sebbar," *Regards sur la France des années 1980: Le Roman* (Stanford University: Anma Libri, 1994) 27.

raconter le faste des villes et des palais comme Mehmed Efendi" (*CS* 183). Just as the Turkish peasants "étaient pauvres, comme des paysans pauvres de la France rurale," these two prominent 18th century figures were more similar than different. They both exoticized the other, and the stories of their impressions would eventually affect the views of their own people: "L'Orient croisant l'Occident, chacun de retour dans son pays natal, le bagage alourdi de notes, des anecdotes piquantes et pittoresques, des deux côtés de la mer" (*CS* 183).

Another powerful reversal is found at the end of *Carnets* where Nasser, a Tunisian historian, attacks Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*. Again Sebbar takes us back to the past, and the words used by Nasser to criticize the 19th century writer sound more like those used today to attack Muslims: "Il est analphabète et il écrit des énormités contre l'islam pour défendre le christianisme. Rien ne l'arrête…C'est un fanatique, un intégriste" (*CS* 270). After attacking Chateaubriand of being "un fétichiste idolâtre," Nasser goes on to explain with lots of zeal how in the 8th century the French army had been "épuisée par le khamsin, le vent du désert et des princes de France sont morts: mort, le comte de Nemours, mort le comte de Montmorency, mort le comte de Vendôme, mort le comte de Nevers..." (*CS* 271). All these attacks reach their limit when he reads a passage from the 12th century *Chroniques arabes des croisades* which describe French women participating in the crusades as either "putains" or "guerrières" (*CS* 271). Nasser's "history lesson" eventually makes the people around him furious and a fight breaks out in the bar. This violent result shows how powerful these juxtapositions can be, and as Donadey asserts how they

"force the French to confront the reductive objectifications they have engaged in by placing them in the position of objects of another's discourse."[100] This narrative tactic serves not only to attack the French but to expose how both sides (Arab and French) are guilty of exoticizing the other. To be able to achieve this, as Michel Laronde discusses in his book *Autour du roman beur*, is the "priviledged tactic of those who belong to neither side and to both sides." [101] Thus, Shéarazade has enough awareness to be able to see beyond and, for example, find connections between Gilles and Pierre Loti (*CS* 182) or Gilles and her father and brothers (*CS* 203,*CS* 218).

Sebbar's "re-writing" of the past goes hand-in-hand with her re-territorializing of "la France profonde." Besides historical references like those mentioned above, Shérazade's personal experiences and interactions throughout France both completely demystify the idea that rural France hasn't been corrupted by immigrants like Paris has, and show how rural France and rural Algeria are very much alike. Several times, different aspects of rural France evoke to her the Algeria of her grandfather, as the smell of the fields after a storm (*CS* 59). She also befriends a runaway French country girl, Francette, who is as alienated in France as Shérazade, unable to relate to the French women portrayed on TV: "A la télé je voyais des femmes, des filles de mon âge, et moi à côté. Je ne voyais plus, je me demandais si j'étais dans la même époque, le même pays que les autres, ceux de la télé" (*CS* 227). This statement recalls the end of Malik

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[100] Ibid 261.
[101] Michel Laronde, *Autour du roman beur; immigration et identité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000) 44.

Chibane's film *Hexagon* when the young Beur says "Les Français, il n'y qu'à la télé." The "Frenchness" being fed to the people by the media are constructs of fixed identities which have nothing to do with reality. Rural France is as marginalized from urban living as the Beur immigrant is in the city. Not only do the two young girls have this marginality in common, but they also share the oppressions of patriarchal societies. Like Shérazade, Francette's brothers have left the farm to look for opportunities elsewhere, and it is up to her to care for the farm animals, the house, the cooking and her little brother. Francette also feels imprisoned in her house, so she escapes taking all the money she can and, like Shérazade, is being followed by the "gendarmes." She is full of anger and at one point before escaping wants to kill all that oppresses her:

> J'ai pris le couteau à viande pointu, bien aiguisé. J'aurais tout tué, la volaille, les lapins, les cochons, les vaches et les veaux, tout, tout, tout. Un massacre. De la mort, du sang partout. (*CS* 228)

This description recalls an earlier scene from *Shérazade* when the squat youngsters break into a police officer's home and one of them destroys everything he can with a knife. (*S* 57) The farm is a type of HLM for Francette, and thus the two girls bond. They bathe together in a river, and Shérazade gives her new friend some clothes so she can begin a new life without her "odeur de fille de ferme" (*CS* 229). They re-enact the traditional ritual of bathers is the *hammam*: "Shérazade lui savonne le dos, la fille savonne le dos de Shérazade" (*CS* 229). Mildred Mortimer believes that by having this scene in an open clearing rather than the closed chambers of the steambath, "the novelist subverts traditional space

while preserving the element of female bonding."[102] Again, Sebbar is able to re-territorialize *both* the traditional Arab space, as Mortimer asserts, *and* rural France by exposing the extreme confinement and servitude of women that can be found in the country.

Besides the "rapprochements" between rural France and rural Algeria, Shérazade also discovers the diversity of people found in the countryside. Her friend Marie teaches her about her native Alsace and its unique language which she insists is not a "patois" but a true "langue": "L'alsacien, c'est une langue; mon père m'a toujours dit ça et il m'interdit de dire que les paysans parlent en patois; il dit que c'est aussi une langue et qu'on doit pas les mépriser" (*CS* 168). This legitimization of different "French" languages in rural France also can legitimize the different way of speaking among the immigrant communities in the city since the Alsacian language is a result of the mixing of different cultures. In addition, at different places, Shérazade discovers the different local accents found throughout the country including the pied-noir accent (*CS* 211, *CS* 259, *CS* 268).

The purity of the countryside is also demystified through the strong immigrant communities encountered by Shérazade. She discovers the Polish presence in Roubaix as a bus driver waits to watch Polac's show "Droit de réponse" on TV: "Polac, il est bien de chez nous celui-là, avec tous les Polonais qu'on a dans cette region…" (*CS* 259). This "chez nous" is very ambiguous

[102] Mortimer 200.

since it could mean Poland *or* "cette region," again distancing the rural life from that in Paris or the media. The interesting detail Sebbar adds is that Néfissa's Algerian family is also watching the same TV show, "Champs-Elysées," as the Polish truck driver. Through these simple details, the writer subtly and repeatedly effaces the imaginary boundaries that separate different people and brings out their shared interests or common humanity.

Another "immigrant" group Shérazade finds in "la France profonde" is a Moroccan community that continues many traditions from their native land: "Des familles d'ouvriers agricoles occupaient plusieurs maisons dans un hameau des environs. Les maisons se touchaient, presque, comme au village natal" (*CS* 251). In this community, Shérazade is invited to a supposed "traditional" Moroccan wedding, "un marriage qui durerait plusieurs jours et dont le déroulement obéirait aux rites." The traditions are respected up to a certain point. Indeed, the women wear traditional "robes de marriage en tissu arabe, cousues et taillées à la mode arabe," and the beautiful materials make Shérazade think of her mother and "les jeudis de couture" and even tempt her to write home. One woman's dress also makes her think of Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* and she wonders if the women of the painting also danced with such grace (*CS* 253).

Nevertheless, the traditional Moroccan wedding is altered by the younger generation which is changing with the times. The generation gap is evident when a female "groupe de rap arabe" arrives at the wedding and causes quite a stir:

> Les filles de Rouen arrivèrent toutes les trois, habillées en noir, jupes de cuir noir, dentelles et bas résilles noirs, les cheveux en brosse. Les vielles femmes poussèrent des cris d'horreur… (*CS* 253).

The older women agree to let them play only if the young musicians limit their performance to the female audience. Even though "à Toulouse le public serait mixte," as a sign of respect, the musicians accept "l'interdit des anciennes" (*CS* 254). The mediation between identities is clear here, and Sebbar not only deterritorializes rural France with the presence of a solid Moroccan community, but she also challenges traditional Arab rituals with the unavoidable contact with modernity and other influences like rap music.

This constant and unavoidable contact is also reflected in the movement of people between France and the rest of the world. At one point, Shérazade is at a truck stop in Lure in east France and notices that "des cartes d'Afrique du Nord tapissaient les lambris autour des bouteilles" (*CS* 175). The waitress tells her they come from clients "qui vont la-bàs; on en a beaucoup. Ils vont, ils viennent. L'Algérie, le Maroc, la Tunisie, le Sud, des pays d'Afrique noire." (*CS* 175) In addition, Sebbar mentions very subtly different kinds of people that can be found in France. There is the "réfugiée politique d'Amérique latine," who lives in Paris as well as Lam, the Vietnamese filmmaker taking "des photos d'une manifestation de réfugiés asiatiques." (*CS* 192) He is looking for a woman from Laos to be in his next film. "Elle vivrait en Auvergne?" asks Shéarazade, as the reader probably would, and Lam responds:

> Pourquoi non? Des Indochinoises ont bien vécu dans les villages d'Afrique du Nord et d'Afrique noire après la guerre d'Indochine, en France aussi, à la campagne, alors? (*CS* 193)

Interestingly, earlier in the novel, the narrator had compared Shérazade, who had tied a white napkin over her ears, to a "Vietnamienne dans une rizière" (*CS* 180).

She also encounters Michel, a "juif du Maroc" who also "cherchait des traces" (*CS* 265) and whose family is scattered all over the world: "Une partie de sa famille est en Israël, des cousins ont émigré au Canada, son père et sa mère vivent à Paris" (*CS* 266). He is looking for Moroccan jews "qui auraient vécu dans l'Espagne musulmane et qui seraient venus à Narbonne" (*CS* 265). Curiously again, Sebbar had earlier connected Shérazade with Spain since she could pass as a Spanish woman, not just using the name Rosa (*CS* 46, *CS*192).

The movement of so many different people is continuous throughout the entire novel, and Shérazade even meets V.S. Naipaul on a dirt road in the middle of the Dordogne, or so she tells Gilles. Even if she is inventing this meeting, she still manages to teach Gilles about the complexities of *métissage*. Naipaul, "cet homme si Anglais, si Antillais et si Hindou à la fois … un métis attaché à trois continents" is so familiar to her that she talks to him like he was her father or brother, as she explains: "Comme si on avait appartenu à la même tribu, je le reconnaissais comme l'un de miens" (*CS* 215). He finds that the Dordogne "ressemble à l'Angleterre, à une certaine campagne anglaise" where he lives. Shérazade accuses him of using stereotypes in his work, and he insists that in his

work it is the truth: "Dans les livres que j'écris, la fiction, c'est la vérité. Je ne peux pas dire autre chose" (*CS* 216). His experiences, his "histoire en morceaux," is what has shaped *his* identity and his relation to others. It is *his* truth and the dialogue with Shérazade, who questions many of his views, opens up a space of negotiation that can lead to mutual understanding.

At the beginning of *Carnets,* the narrator wonders if Gilles and Shérazade will be able to communicate: "S'ils parlaient, est-ce qu'ils s'entendraient?" (*CS* 27). Their one week trip together within the enclosed cabin of the truck forces them to come into contact with each other and establish a dialogism that opens both of their eyes to other realities they had otherwise ignored. For Gilles, this development can be seen using Shérazade's unusual green eyes. When Gilles first saw Shérazade sleeping in his truck he was certain he knew her eye color: "Ses yeux seront noirs" (*CS* 13). Nevertheless, his perception began changing: "Si elle ouvre les yeux, il sait qu'ils sont verts. Dans les docks il ne savait pas, il avait pensé qu'ils seraient noirs et ils avaient été verts…" (*CS* 76). Finally, when the two travelers part, the last page of the novel shows how Gilles has come to terms with this "newness" and realizes his "préjugés": "Ses yeux étaient toujours verts, il s'attendait encore une fois à des yeux noirs, et ils n'étaient pas noirs, ils n'avaient jamais été noirs. Il tendit à Shérazade une rose…" (*CS* 281). He knows now that she is not a clearly defined individual, but a complex ensemble of divisions. She can be seen as a symbol of Sebbar's fiction, which she describes as

"un lieu unitaire, rassembleur des divisions, des schizes meurtrières, des éclats de mémoire et d'Histoire avec toujours la tentation de la fuite, de la fugue, de l'aventure solitaire, du voyage au loin ..., le lieu de l'éternité" (*LP* 138). But as Sebbar, Shérazade eventually does not lose herself in her flight, but writes in order to gather as much as possible. When Gilles picks up one of her notebooks, her style of writing is just like Sebbar's: "Elle écrit n'importe comment, n'importe où, n'importe quoi aussi sûr. C'est même pas un journal" (*CS* 90). Nevertheless, even though "c'est écrit dans tous les sens," the in-between spaces opened up by her nomadic strategies lead to an understanding: "Si on lit, on comprend. Elle n'utilise pas un code strict qui rendrait le carnet illisible" (*CS* 90). And when Gilles continues reading and the story abrubtly stops, he "cherche la suite" (*CS* 91). This desire to know more is what Sebbar opens up with her work. Readers who had never heard of Tristan, Abd el-Kader, Rimbaud, or *Carte de Séjour* now have the tools to embark on their own journey of gathering divisions and to come to the realization that fixed identity labels are never constant and reliable. In *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, Julia Kristeva points out how the unavoidable contact between and among cultures, specifically in France, leads to a constant revision of identities and how this vitality and dynamism cannot be ignored: "en France, en cette fin de vingtième siècle, chacun est destiné à rester le même *et* l'autre: sans

oublier sa culture de départ, mais en la relativisant au point de la faire non seulement voisiner, mais aussi alterner avec celle des autres."[103]

[103] Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Fayard, 1988) 288.

Chapter 2: Calixthe Beyala's Infiltration of Identity

The word "infiltration"undoubtedly has negative connotations since it implies secrecy, invasion and some kind of system failure which has allowed an unwanted element or person to creep in a clearly defined limited space. In her analysis of binary oppositions such as inside/outsider, black/white, rich/poor, Mireille Rosello uses the figure of the infiltrator to offer a powerful new way of articulating cultural differences and cultural practice. The infiltrator, she argues, is an ambivalent figure, one who penetrates a closed territory only to expose the fantasy upon which power relations are founded. The way this shrewd player works is not by "rehabilitat[ing] the ghetto nor claim[ing] the borderland as his or her reappropriated territory. He or she goes along with power's fantasy that it is a coherent structure."[104] This way, the power structures are satisfied and let their guard down since the infiltrator attests to their success and superiority by *pretending* to "believe that minority discourses, emergent literatures, sub-cultures often construct themselves as satellites of the core, margin, borders, in-betweens."[105] As Rosello attests, "the belief in this pretence may be power's blind spot and its weakness."[106]

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[104] Mireillo Rosello, *Infiltrating Culture: Power and identity in contemporary women's writing* (Manchester; NY: Manchester University Press, 1996) 8.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.

For the purpose of this chapter, power refers to such identity constructions as race and gender, which for the immigrant woman are not divisible elements but go hand-in-hand in her self-definition. On the other hand, for black men, as Carole Boyce Davies explains, there is the possibility of "speaking only in terms of their race with the assumption that their gender remains unmarked."[107] Nevertheless, the Black woman has "the additional identity of femaleness which interferes with seamless Black identity and is therefore either ignored, erased or 'spoken for'."[108] Boyce Davies goes on to criticize women who believe they can separate gender and race:

> One still finds some women trying to say that they want to speak only as an African or as a "Black,"and not as a woman, as if it were possible to divest oneself of one's gender and stand as neutered within the context of palpable and visible historical, gendered and racialized identities.[109]

In addition, as Sara Suleri explains, the intersections between gender and race are sites with wider discursive possibilities for "the politically loaded category of post-colonial woman."[110] At these intersections, the category of Black woman goes beyond Judith Butler's category of woman as one of "performance of gender"[111] since "the category of Black woman, or woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on

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[107] Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 8.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Sara Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 765.

the particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist."[112]

In the case of the infiltrator, who is "multiple and uncertain of his or her real affiliations,"what we see is a need to "perform a *lack* of ambiguity"as Rosello explains:

> When the infiltrator 'passes' for a member of a group to which he or she knows that he or she does not belong naturally, transparently, the ambiguity of the performance of belonging, of being at one with the others, exposes the fact that each performance of identity is also similar to his or her game.[113]

As this chapter will show, Calixthe Beyala has become a master at this infiltrating game, and her tremendous popularity and success in France have not only empowered the "post-colonial woman"world-wide but have challenged the concept of French identity. As Rosello concludes, "if the infiltrator's insertion into a structure that imagines itself solid is relatively successful, then the identity of all the other members of the supposedly natural community is brought into question."[114] Such is the case with the Cameroonian-born female writer living in Paris, Calixthe Beyala.

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[111] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
[112] Boyce Davies 8-9.
[113] Rosello 17.
[114] Rosello 17.

Beyala is "the most famous African woman writer in France today"[115] with ten novels and two essays written in only fourteen years. She has appeared several times on television and has won numerous literary awards including the "Grand prix du roman de L'Académie française"for her 1996 novel *Les Honneurs perdus*. This novel was also at the heart of a heated controversy with allegations of plagiarism and could possibly be seen as an unconscious infiltration since the "Beyala affair," as it has become known, has "helped to hold this African writer at the center of the French literary scene and has challenged the role of both the media and the academy in the creation of the post-colonial writer's reputation."[116]

In addition, her great success can also be attributed to the fact that her work is published by three prominent French publishers (Stock, Albin Michel, and Le Pré aux Clercs) as well as to the availability of six of her novels in the inexpensive "livre de poche" series, which shows how popular these works are with metropolitan French readers. As Nicki Hitchcott explains, this availability cannot be found in other francophone African women writers who are either published in Africa or in Parisian publishers like l'Harmattan and Présence Africaine:

> Indigenous African editions are generally expensive to buy and reinforce the French readership's perception of African women's writing as marginal and foreign. Metropolitan African editions such as l'Harmattan

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[115] Nicki Hitchcott "The Post-Colonial Woman," *Post-Colonial Cultures in France,* eds. Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 211.
[116] Hitchcott 212.

> are also more expensive than mass-produced paperbacks and suffer from low prestige and a lack of distribution networks.[117]

Another clear sign of Beyala's world-wide success is the fact that two of her novels (*Le Petit Prince de Belleville* and *C'est le Soleil qui m'a brulée)* have been translated into English and thus are available to a very different audience.

Regarding Beyala's success, Jean-Marie Volet explains how this woman is one of very few African writers to make a living from their literature and describes her as "developing into one of the most provocative women writers of her generation."[118] Hitchcott also adds that Beyala is "one of the few African authors to employ a literary agent."[119] The writer herself admits that she does not like "l'amateurisme," and she abhors "les éditeurs qui sont incapables d'assurer la diffusion et la promotion à grande échelle des textes qu'on leur confie."[120]

Instead of acknowledging and celebrating a very successful infiltration of French culture by Beyala, some critics think this mass production has turned this writer into "a marketable commodity [that] bears traces of what was the old French colonial policy of assimilation."[121] Hitchott, for example, is unable to see Beyala's successful dual positioning but insists that the writer's publishers are "emphasizing the exoticism of the migrant writer" simply by referring to her

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[117] Hitchcott 213.
[118] Jean-Marie Volet, "Calixthe Beyala, or the literary success of a Cameroonian woman living in Paris," *World Literature Today*, 67.2 (1993): 309.
[119] Hitchcott 213.
[120] Rangira Béatrice Gallimore, *L'Oeuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala: Le renouveau de l'écriture féminine en Afrique francophone sub-saharienne* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997) 202.
[121] Hitchcott 213.

birthplace in Africa on the books' back cover![122] In a 1992 interview, the writer explains that in her books she does not talk about Paris "en tant que tel" but "de l'Afrique transposée à Paris."[123] This African infiltration or interpenetration of cultures is missed by Hitchcott who insists that "the juxtaposition of Africa and France stresses the geographical separation of the two locations."[124] Unfortunately, the fact that Beyala is able to maneuver between supposed "inside"and "outside" French and African cultures is seen as "the dichotomous position of the post-colonial writer in France."[125] On the other hand, by rightly describing Beyala as "Parisienne jusqu'au bout des ongles," Sylvie Genevoix sees this writer's ability not only to present the juxtaposition of cultures in her work but to infiltrate and challenge French identity itself.[126] Being incorporated into mainstream French culture should *not* be seen as "ideologically problematic"[127] since Beyala insists on the fact that she *is* French and has no problem addressing her "compatriotes" with plenty of patriotism: "Française je suis; française je reste; française je suis fière d'être, n'en déplaise à certains."[128]

Nevertheless, it has taken some time for the writer to arrive at this open assertion, and this slow process reflects her personal infiltration into French

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[122] Ibid.
[123] Narcisse Mouellé Kombi, "Calixthe Beyala et son *Petit prince de Belleville*," *Amina* 268 (Aug. 1992) 11.
[124] Hitchcott 214.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Sylvie Genevoix, "Portrait: Calixthe Beyala," *Madame Figaro*, July 22, 1993.
[127] Hitchcott 214.

culture. For example, one can see this development in the titles of her two political essays: *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses soeurs occidentales* (1995) and *Lettre d'une Afro-française à ses compatriotes* (2000). In the first case, having labeled herself as "Africaine" allows her to be accepted into French society since she has separated herself from the French *pretending* to agree on the coherency of this structure. Later, she can penetrate even deeper and call herself an "Afro-française," which still keeps the French-French reader "en laisse" since with the hyphen there is still an acceptance of a separation. Once *inside* the text though, Beyala repudiates such hyphenated labels as "Franco-camerounais," which "situe l'autre dans des sphères de différences, l'éloigne de la communauté nationale et crée en son sein des sous-communautés nationales."[129] Finally, she shatters the fantasy of "a coherent structure" by repeatedly calling herself a "Française" and proceeds to firmly present her political agenda of establishing a quota system in France similar to the American model.

Her continuous insistence on her Frenchness and the repetition that she is talking about "notre pays" convinces the French reader to let her in since she must have every right to be involved in her country's affairs. With the identity construction penetrated and destabilized, she can go on infiltrating other structures. She is now running for Secrétaire général de la francophonie when she

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[128] Calixthe Beyala, *Lettre d'une Afro-française à ses compatriots* (Paris: Éditions Mango, 2000) 30.
[129] *Lettre d'une Afro-française* 40.

had previously pretended to not want to be "caractérisée comme un écrivain de la francophonie" as well as not get politically involved like Senghor did:

> En général, les hommes utilisent l'écriture comme moyen pour arriver à des functions politiques. Les femmes considèrent, en revanche, l'écriture comme une fin en soi.[130]

Her initial distancing from both the francophonie world and politics again allows these structures to put their guards down and let this "petite femme,"[131] as she humbly calls herself in an interview, go in deeper. Both through her writing and her many other personal projects, Beyala continuously positions herself in the intersection of "race" and "gender," or what Boyce Davies calls "the Elsewhere"[132] in order to expose and challenge the creation and reinforcement of definite and imposed categories of identity which only serve to repress and subjugate immigrant (and particularly Black) women. She not only questions "the African way" or Africanness in general, as explained in the introduction, but she challenges the definition of the African woman by insisting that she is "l'Africaine typique" yet by also firmly maintaining her Frenchness. She could not position herself this way if she didn't live in France as she explains: "Je ne pourrai pas vivre en Afrique…l'exil est ma survie…l'exil est mon auteur."[133]

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[130] Gallimore 202-203.
[131] Renée Mendy-Ongoundou, "Calixthe Beyala, candidate au poste de Secrétaire général(e) de l'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie,"*Amina* 378 (Oct 2001) 64.
[132] Boyce-Davies 36.
[133] Emmanuel Matateyou, "Calixthe Beyala: Entre terroir et l'exil," *The French Review* 69(4): 615.

Beyala explains that the Africa of tomorrow, both in Africa and the African diaspora, will emerge from the "bidonvilles" (or shanty towns), and that from these will also emerge "le français de demain." She also tells us that it will be a very different language: "Ce ne sera pas cette langue de Baudelaire figée et morte quelque part. Ce ne sera pas la copie de l'Occident; ce sera quelque chose de riche..." Since Beyala herself is a product of a "bidonville," this richness undoubtedly emerges from her writing and not only creates a new French language, but also creates very complex characters who reflect the existential complexity of the post-colonial woman. While drawing upon several of Beyala's works, this chapter will focus specifically on the writer's infiltration strategies in her 1994 novel *Assèze l'Africaine* and will show the richness of her characterization, plot development and narrative style and how these elements come together to redefine fixed hegemonic identity labels.

The writer admits that "il faut interroger l'Histoire," yet her questions are not of "desperation" as her narrator states at the beginning of *Assèze*: "Je ne parle pas désespoir. Je parle vie."[134] She is not looking for a "why" but for a "how" – for the way history has created what she calls "a sacrificed youth" or "a lost generation" of which she considers herself to be a part.[135] Beyala insists we cannot build a present without *looking* at the past, not with judgmental eyes but

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[134] Calixthe Beyala, *Assèze l'Africaine* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1994) 20. All further citations will come from this edition.
[135] Matateyou 615.

simply to observe and understand, and she explains: "Peut-être je n'apporterai pas grand chose mais en psychanalysant cette jeunesse, on pourrait avoir un début de solution pour le petit monde." [136] She is trying to destroy the complexes that are keeping African youth from finding true existential freedom. This goal can also be found in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* as he states at the beginning of his work:

> I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and the black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it.[137]

With her book's title, *Assèze l'Africaine*, Beyala initially bounds her young protagonist to the two fixed identity categories of race *and* gender found in the label "Africaine." Nevertheless after Assèze recognizes the power structures that have constructed her identity and becomes aware of the discourses of power that have manipulated her throughout her past, she then infiltrates these same constructed structures in order to expose the performative nature of identity, or as Judith Butler explains, identity as "a politically efficacious phantasm." [138]

"Il faut détruire pour reconstruire. Or pour reconstruire l'Afrique telle qu'elle est là, elle doit être détruite," says Beyala. But her destructive tactic is not one of direct attack on the power structures but rather one of infiltration, of creating "a mirror territory, the ghost of a powerful presence which both imitates

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[136] Ibid.
[137] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grover Press, 1967) 14.
[138] Quoted in Mireille Rosello 16.

and parodies the structure that oppresses it." [139] This is not an easy task since, as Rosello explains, "Power has a vested interest in eliminating infiltration […] by describing it as a specific form of dishonest invasion." [140] For example, it could be argued that the plagiarism allegations against Beyala are reactions to a realization of her “invasion”of French culture and thus an attempt at “eliminating”any further infiltration.

Nevertheless, Beyala does play a sort of "dishonest" game by giving Assèze the role and power of infiltrator who "passes" for a member of a group to which she knows from the beginning she no longer belongs to (or never did). This ambiguity of performance of belonging exposes the fact that each performance of identity (African or female) is also similar to Assèze's "pretending" game. The result of her infiltration not only brings into question the identity of the infiltrated group but also may create serious confusion and alienation in the infiltrator who can eventually, like Assèze, enter a serious state of depression and withdrawal.

As explained earlier, writers like Beyala take to heart what Foucault sees as “the real political task”of unmasking “the political violence”which quietly or “obscurely”creates oppressive discourses in society.[141] This “unmasking”is a slow and painful process for Assèze since each mask that comes off is part of whom

[139] Rosello 4.
[140] Rosello 13.

she has believed herself to be (or performed) for years. She admits at the beginning of her narration that she is not looking for excuses: "Je ne cherche pas des circonstances atténuantes à mes actes" (19), and by switching to the first person plural "nous," she infiltrates the reader's realm with an invitation to do the same: "Je n'écris pas pour vous parler de nos misères, mais de quelque moyen pour y échapper" (19). Later she adds that she is writing "pour l'Afrique au long sommeil"(20), the same Africa that Beyala herself wants to shock or awaken with her writing: "Il faut que l'Afrique se réveille. Nous n'existons pas. Ce n'est pas moi qui l'invente. C'est dans le quotidien."[142]

It is the everyday experiences that Assèze infiltrates as she moves from the African village, to the city of Douala and finally to Paris. As she visits these different arenas through her narrative, she not only will unmask identity constructions, but she will also expose the very dialectics of infiltration itself since once inside a given territory, whatever "part"is being played in the pretending game can take over the infiltrator leaving him/her in a state of confusion and depression since he/she may lose sight of where the game ends and "reality"begins. It is interesting to note Beyala's quote before the novel begins: "Une biographie est une paire de lunettes noires. Face à la vérité, tout le monde est aveugle." Such is the case with Assèze who, even as she is looking back in

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[141] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 6.
[142] Matateyou 615.

time and narrating her life, is not able to see the very power structures she is unveiling but remains trapped within the constructions of society. At one point she expresses her frustration at not being able to overcome fixed labels and "métisser des univers sans que l'un étrangle l'autre. Toute tentative de transvasement est vaine. On reste dans nos compartiments et c'est dommage, mais normal peut-être"(95).

Before she begins her "revision"of the past, Assèze is troubled by the problem of what "voice" (or mask) to use in her narrative: "Quelle voix adopter? [...] J'étais différente à l'époque, je ne suis plus la même" (20). The fact that she has to re-play her performances makes her story very complicated since as she is speaking, she is performing her present-day role. After having suffered many humiliations throughout her journey, she is now rich, living in Paris, married to a powerful (white) Frenchman. She has arrived at this new role by following her rich step-sister's footsteps from Douala to Paris and eventually letting her die. After Sorraya's death, Assèze has yet to begin the process of "(re)construction," and her almost child-like style of narration illustrates the early stages of a process that once completed in the prologue is expressed through her state of depression or complete withdrawal:

> J'habite à Paris et je n'ai pas de jardin. Quand mon mari mange, j'ai faim. Quand il se couche, j'ai sommeil. Lorsque les gens nous rendent visite, ils ne parlent qu'à mon époux et ça m'arrange. Je m'éclipse et je vais prier dans ma chambre.

This passivity and indifference is described by Homi Bhabha as "a symbolic space of cultural survival – a melancholia in revolt." This "disincorporation," he explains is an attempt "to break the marginality of the social and political limits of space; to redraw the boundaries in a psychic, fantasmatic space."[143] This new "space" is a mediation or rejection of those predefined categories of identity which kept Assèze from developing an individual identity away from the imposed collective one. Like Beyala who rejects "toute forme d'autorité, d'absolutisme,"[144] her protagonist has opted to withdraw temporarily from society but is showing signs of reconstruction not only by writing a novel about her life as she says, but by seeing other possibilities: "[J]e commence à entrevoir la possibilité d'ouvrir un restaurant africain et cela devient mon nouvel horizon"(44). These plans are still "up in the air,"but the importance lies in the fact that she is not attached to a "fixed"plan of having to follow her "mauvais exemple"(95), Sorraya. Sorraya's "mauvaise foi," which as Sartre explains, "dissimule la totale liberté de l'engagement,"[145] confuses Assèze and initially limits her awareness of self in the new world context. Until Assèze does not rid herself of Sorraya she is nothing, since she is continuously trying to find elsewhere "des valeurs ou des ordres qui légitim[ent] [sa] conduite." It is clear that Calixthe Beyala believes in the existential reality that "l'homme n'est

[143] Homi K. Bhabha, "Post Colonial Authority and Postcolonial Guilt," *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, (New York : Routledge, 1992) 65.
[144] Matateyou 615.

rien d'autre que ce qu'*il* se fait" and this is the lesson she wants to share with humanity and especially with her fellow Africans who are continuously following instead of leading. Assèze, who at many times is compared to the continent Africa, does not find her freedom until the end of the narrative when Sorraya is dead and it is up to her to face the existential reality of having to continually reinvent herself and to accept that it will not be easy being free. "L'homme est condamné à être libre."[146] In order to reach this freedom from following colonial, post-colonial, and/or neo-colonial constructs will take a lot of revising on the part of Assèze who must infiltrate the dialectical discourses of identity that are misleading and unmask them.

The first staging of these discourses to be unveiled is the construction of racial identity or how, as Frantz Fanon explains in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "it is the racist who creates his inferior."[147] In *Assèze,* Beyala exposes how this racism is not necessarily a Black vs. White direct dialectic anymore, but a neo-colonial Black vs. Black struggle, a deeply engrained inferiority complex that, as Fanon explains, leads Blacks "to protest against the inferiority that [they have felt] historically. Since in all periods the Negro has been defined as inferior, he attempts to react with a superiority complex" (213). From the first page of Assèze's narrative, the reader is aware of the importance of race since the narrator

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[145] Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Editions Nagel, 1946) 81.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 93.

openly explains that she will tell the story of "l'indépendence vue côté nègre" (13). The way she describes her village clearly expresses a mixed superiority/inferiority complex towards her people and her origins since she needs the White other to validate her village's history and existence: "Ce coin de brousse n'a pas de nom défini, ni d'histoire bien claire. Sauf peut-être sous la colonization allemande" (17).

Similarly, Frantz Fanon contrasts his situation living in France to that of a Russian or German who speaks French badly yet has "a language of his own, a country." "When it comes to the case of the Negro," he continues "nothing of the kind. He has no culture, no civilization, no 'long historical past'."[148] As Assèze has incorporated this view of her people, she insists on the "sauvagerie" of the plant life and on all the illnesses present among the people:

> En trois mots, une nature maladivement féconde, pétrie de sentines, bourrelée de frises, embrochée de lianes et de mille et un marigots, asile de superstitions, de serpents boas, de vipers, de hautes herbes coupantes et d'innombrables mille-pattes. Un vivier pour pangolins, moustiques, crocodiles et singes. […] Pas pour les hommes. (17-18)

As she is writing this novel, the narrator cannot overcome her "westernized" gaze, which has "White" blinders on, and a definite idea of what "civilization" entails. In retrospect, she does not see her people, including herself at the time, as human, and she describes the adoration for "White" civilization almost in ridicule:

[148] Ibid 34.

> Le seul degré de civilisation auquel nous avions accès était la venue, une fois par an, du camion de vaccination […] Nous, les sous-déchets, obséquieux, aux petits soins de "Monsieur le doctor", vomissant de gigantesques petites attentions, offrant de magnifiques somptueux cadeaux, nos poules, nos oeufs, nos chèvres et nos femmes en guirlandes. (18)

Everyone in the village, except Assèze's grandmother, wants to be White, and the model of Fanon's "superiority complex" by far is the owner of the village store, Mama-Mado, who idealizes the White "civilization" and sells all the necessary products to make you "White:

> Elle braillait: "Nouvelle sardine de France! Nouvelle cocotte-minute explosive haute protection! Devenez plus blanc que blanc avec trois fleurs d'Orient! (15)

Mama-Mado's and her capitalist mindset is the neo-colonial presence that continues to reinforce oppressive colonial ideals: "De la colonie, il ne restait que la boutique de Mama-Mado"(14). This presence is all that suffices for the villagers, including Assèze, to worship Whiteness in all its forms. Mama-Mado not only sells the "White" products, but she advertises a "White"image that is impossible for these villagers to attain. She sells baby formula, which she claims will make the children "aussi potelés que bébé Blédina," and on the walls of her store she has posters of famous French celebrities like Sylvie Vartan and Cloclo

whom the children idolize and whose images "faisaient mousser [leur] imagination enfantine"(22).[149]

The arrival of the White Christian priest at the village reinforces the villagers' inferiority and thus their desire to be White. The priest arrives with his Black helper/translator who is only known as "le Nègre" until the priest leaves the village and we finally learn that his name is Antoine. Even though this "Nègre" arrives driving a scooter, an obvious sign of progress for the villagers, the narrator admits that "on ne pouvait l'imaginer ailleurs que derrière un Blanc, appliqué à porter ses bagages ou à lui préparer des petits plats"(30). Nevertheless, the "Nègre" convinces the villagers that if they want to own a "mobylette"they have to follow Père Michel, "car seul le Dieu des Blancs apportait la richesse"(32). Again, the villagers are taking over an illusory and unattainable goal for which they cannot even explain the reason or need but simply label as "le chemin du progress"without an explanation: "Nous avions du mal à comprendre ce qui nous arrivait. Il y avait bien des sentiments de peur, mais finalement ce qui prédominait déjà, c'était le désir d'avoir une Mobylette"(32). The narrator also later echoes the people's engrained inferiority or dependency on the White role model by rejecting the possibility of Nègre Antoine becoming their priest: "Un prêtre noir, ça ne se faisait pas"(43).

[149] Sylvie Vartan and Cloclo (Claude François) were famous French pop singers in the early 1960's and 70's. Both were born outside of France (Bulgaria and Egypt respectively) and had some kind of immigrant descent.

Père Michel is never portrayed as a "colonizer"per se, but his teachings only serve to reinforce what colonialism has already left behind. As the children attend their catechism classes, their desire to become White like the angels and doves the priest talks about increases: "Ne m'approchez pas! Je suis un ange! Je suis blanc. Eloignez-vous Satan!" yells the chosen child of the day to the other Black children, since they have been taught that the devil was black:

> Père Michel nous avait dit que le diable était noir. Chacun avait regardé sa peau. C'était un prédateur invisible qui aspirait les imprudents et ne les laissait plus sortir. Quoi encore? (40)

In her article "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," bell hooks explains this desire to be White as:

> The contradictory longing to possess the reality of the Other, even though that reality is one that wounds and negates, is expressive of the desire to understand the mystery, to know intimately through imitation, as though such knowing worn like an amulet, a mask, will ward away the evil, the terror. [150]

The narrator herself unmasks and explains the children's behavior:

> Nous ne voulions plus subir l'exil intérieur qui nous mettait à l'écart de la race humaine. Nous voulions devenir des anges, prêts à nous envoler sans le savoir. L'influence blanche. Le complexe blanc. L'anticomplexe blanc. Des enculables en puissance. On croyait que l'âme pouvait se blanchir. (37)

Even though she does include herself in this "we," she no longer is part of this group once she moves forward in her narrative and takes a different "role."

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[150] bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," *Cultural Studies* edited, and with an introduction, by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, (New York : Routledge, 1992) 339.

Against the will of her stubborn grandmother who despises what she calls "le Poulassie"or anything deriving from the White colonizer, Assèze is baptized by the new priest and becomes Assèze-Christine, an obvious symbol of the dialectics to follow. The tension between Assèze's mother, Andela, who "pensait que l'école des Blancs [l]'armerait,"(45) and her grandmother who blames Andela's pregnancy on the French educational system and Western society as a whole create a constant battle in their home. Andela, like Mama-Mado, idolizes French things like her perfume "Siussy, de chez Laure,"and her mother cannot comprehend the White "mode" or standard of beauty and its strict limitations: "Ah! Ah! Les choses des Blancs! Ceci est bon, cela est mauvais. Va choisir là dedans!"(45).

The villagers' worship of "Whiteness" is not limited to "White" people, but it carries over to the "Nègres-Blancs" like Awono, the rich man Assèze's mother was supposed to marry until she had sex with another man and got pregnant with Assèze. After thirteen years, Awono arrives in the village wanting Andela to pay him back for the dowry she had received when they were engaged. When the people see him, they cry out "Il est là, le Prince des princes!" and rush to touch him and kiss his feet. Assèze admits she was also taken over by the power this man represented as she explains: "J'étais là moi aussi, et je cherchais à le toucher, à lui parler, à lui dire combien j'étais heureuse de le voir…"(46). Fanon talks of the Black man feeling as a "demigod" when he returns home from

France. There is a “definite absolute mutation,” a need to be deified by the ones left behind (19). However, Awono didn’t need to go to France to find this status, but the simple fact that he is part of the “new” Cameroonian government gives him the “White’s” position of power. Assèze sees this superiority and needs him to justify her existence. She goes as far as lying to the other kids telling them Awono is her father to which one kid quickly sets her straight: “«Tu parles, répondit le gosse. Des pères comme celui-là n’existent pas»”(48).

In order to pay her debt, Assèze’s mother agrees to send her daughter to the city of Douala to live with Awono so she can serve as a "role model" for Sorraya, Awono's daughter who has become too "blanchisée" (61) or White. Even though he insists she will not be a servant and does treat Assèze as his daughter to a certain degree, in Assèze’s eyes, this clear “slave trade” reinforce’s Awono’s master position over her and her dependency on him will last until his death. Meanwhile, Assèze does infiltrate the “Nègre-Blanc” domain of Douala, and during her narration she exposes the performativeness of this identity both within other characters and herself.

The first thing she notices on her way to the city is the cars and the way the traffic works. When the passenger sitting next to her explains to her how the incoming and outgoing traffic is divided by a white line, she exclaims: “Les Blancs sont vraiment très forts,” assuming this “civilization” has to be their work.

Once in Douala, she realizes Awono is not the only Nègre-Blanc, but that the entire city is a place “où des Nègres blanchisés imitent leurs confrères blancs.”

> Ils sont ce qu’ils sont, ni Blancs, ni Nègres, des espèces de transsexuels culturels, vaguement sur les bords, et tout au fond pouilleux. Ils singent le Blanc et affichent au milieu de leurs indigestions diverses un mépris envers le people du trottoir. (66)

Her awe towards this “paradis”of modernity quickly gets interrupted when she arrives at Awono’s affluent neighborhood and the first thing the children on the street exclaim upon seeing her is: “Qu’est-ce qu’elle est noire!”(69). Thus, it is no longer only in France that “the Black man finds his real face,” as Fanon concluded in 1967, but now “Black” comes in shades, and these shades are as much a social construct as the Black-White dichotomy. The need to find an inferior, just like in the case of Mama-Mado in the village, is also found in the city, and later on Assèze will also find this in Paris.

When she arrives at the new house, which she compares to a palace (though later she admits it was a decrepit old German administration building), she is in awe at its luxury and feels dirty and unworthy of being there. The narrator explains "Je pourrissais de complexes" (70), and it is these very complexes that construct the role she will play. Even though the narrator attempts to explain that she was not stupid enough to think that the palace would take her out of her misery "comme si poser les pieds dans les traces de pas d'une femme blanche eût pu changer mes origines autant que ma couleur" (72), Assèze does exactly this and follows Sorraya's footsteps all the way to Paris. To her, Sorraya

is “une Blanche” since she sees her as her superior because Sorraya keeps her in her place.

Even though Sorraya insists that “Blanche ou noire, cela n’a d’importance que pour les imbéciles,”(113) she does contradict herself when she wants to show her superiority and distancing from “Blackness.” She goes as far as insinuating she is not *really* Black as in the following conversation where she accusses Assèze of being lazy at school, using a stereotype of Blacks that Fanon also describes[151]:

> “Ah les Nègres! Ah les Nègres! Qu’est-ce qu’ils sont cons et paresseux!” J’essayais de me defendre, de lui dire qu’elle était aussi une Négresse. Ce à quoi elle répliquait: “Il y a Nègre et Nègre! Les vrais Nègres sont cons!”(93).

At the house, the most obvious Master-Slave dialectics that reinforces Sorraya's superiority complex is her relationship with the maid Amina. Regardless of having grown up together, Amina and Sorraya had very different fates with their different defined social "roles." Sorraya treats Amina like a slave and Amina calls her "maîtresse" and follows orders even if grudgingly. Regardless of her awareness of Sorraya's abuse, Amina does nothing to change things aside from complaining and denouncing the corruption and repression of the house. She is paralyzed by her externally constructed "Black" identity, which remains fixed and unchanging even after Awono's death. "I am fixed," explains Fanon frustrated with the fact that blackness is a social construct that keeps his

people from being truly free.[152] There is no biological black race, he explains, but an understanding of race caused by our socialization. Those who cannot find true happiness in *Assèze l'Africaine* are the ones that cannot see beyond these constructs and create their own self. "Now the fragments have been put together by another self," explains Fanon of his own ability to recreate his identity and take control of what defines him.[153]

To begin this process of re-creation, Assèze attempts to defy Sorraya's superiority by refusing to follow her orders and, by doing so, does infiltrate and somewhat alter the power relations of the house. Assèze is able to infiltrate the Master's gaze, and this is very evident when she returns to her village to visit "ces cambroussards" (127). The first thing that shocks her is the disgusting smell of the village and then she becomes aware of the nakedness of the people. They all run to greet her just like they did for Awono, the "Nègre-Blanc" (or White Black man), and at this moment, Assèze becomes herself (through her performance) a "Nègre-Blanche." Like Awono, she "goes home to be deified" (Fanon 19) and to validate her new superior status by showing off her “new” self to the villagers: “Ils me demandaient des informations sur la manière de vivre des Blancs-Nègres, ce qu’ils mangeaient, si j’avais rencontré Sylvie Vartan”(132).

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[151] For a list of stereotypes that bind Black people see *Black Skin, White Masks* 116.
[152] Fanon, *Black Skin* 109.
[153] Ibid

Nevertheless, the one thing that will definitely confirm her new superior status in the eyes of the people, as she explains, "c'était la certitude que je parlais français comme les Blancs"(132). As Fanon, explains, in his chapter "The Negro and Language, by Hélène Régnard the mastery of the White man's language is the road to power:

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.[154]

The people of the village could care less what Assèze said in French but just wanted the certainty of this important marker:

> Ils voulaient entendre l'accent français, des nouveaux mots dont ils ignoraient la signification, mais la signification des mots, ils s'en fichaient complètement. (132)

At first Assèze's new "role" is put to the test since she doesn't quite know her "lines:" "Je me taisais parce que, sur-le-champ, les choses ne me venaient pas"(132). However, after a long walk by the river, she eventually realizes that she knows at least twelve new words such as "Inanition. Exhibitionnisme. Intellectualisme. Apartheid." Words which, she adds sarcastically, "je n'étais même pas certaine qu'ils ne les connaissent pas"(133). The people may not know these words as such, but they are living them, and the order of the words Beyala choses for Assèze to remember reflects the effect of her protagonist's

[154] Fanon, *Black Skin* 17-18. Also see p. 38.

performance. First, the villagers are starving both for food *and* knowledge (Inanition). Through her "exhibitionnisme" and supposed "intellectualisme," Assèze manages to keep the people "hungry" and beneath her (since she is not really sharing the knowledge but rubbing it in their faces) leading to apartheid or the segregation of peoples.

Once she remembers her "lines," she runs back to the village just to get stage fright again because of the pressure to perform:

> [D]ès que je vis tous ces yeux qui clignotaient comme des insectes, toutes ces oreilles impatientes de capter mes mots comme si d'eux dépendaient leur avenir,
> je refermai ma bouche. (132)

Her mother is so ashamed that she begins to cry and postpones her welcoming party for several days. Once ready, she invites twelve neighbors so Assèze can have another shot at playing out her superiority: "Il fallait que toutes ces râleuses sachent que nous […] étions d'une classe au moins supérieure à celle de mes compatriotes" (133). Finally, Assèze is enlightened at this reunion and her performance is full of enough illusions and exaggerations to put her up on a pedestal:

> La verve me vint d'un coup. Douala c'était le paradis, la maison d'Awono, le palais. Mes descriptions étaient en puissance dix au-dessus de la réalité. C'était un besoin d'accabler la pouffiasserie, de remettre les esprits dans leur mort et la mort dans les esprits. (133)

Her mother couldn't be more proud of "le *Poulassie*" in her daughter, and in retrospective Assèze now can see what she was doing back then: "Je venais

d'entrer dans cette race de girafes qui, pommelées de complexes, se montent le cou pour mâchonner quatre feuilles au sommet du snobisme" (133).

This infiltration doesn't go without some pain since she becomes "le modèle type pour toute la raclure," but her childhood friends do not fall for her game as one of them tells her: "Tu crois que t'es meilleure que nous? Différente de nous? Tssss! Tssss! Ton cul pue la femme" (135). Assèze is badly beaten up by the other girls who, as the narrator admits "voulaient que je paie pour avoir osé étendre mes frontières au-dela de notre village" (135). Even in the present she seems to not see that it was not the expanding of her frontiers that cost her this awful beating, but the fact that she did not truly share her position and help her people. Beyala herself admits that success without helping others has no meaning, even it this entails risking your own comfort:

> Il faut des gens connus, qui peuvent utiliser leur notoriété pour se batter et défendre les peuples noirs. Mais personne ne le fait, car ils ont tous peur que leur entourage les délaisse et que le monde économique leur tourne le dos. Pourtant, on peut se demander à quoi sert la vie d'un être humain si ce n'est à améliorer celle des autres. Le succès est vain s'il s'est pas mis au service des autres.[155]

On the other hand, all Assèze and her mother dream about is to use Assèze's newly found position and become rich and live in luxury, dreams Assèze knows are based on lies and illusions since she has told her mother she is making very good grades: "Je sais aujourd'hui que j'aurais dû lui dire la vérité, au lieu de

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[155] Hélène Régnard, "Afrik.com cuisine Calixthe Beyala,"11 December 2000. Found at *www.afrik.com/journal/culture/cult-158-6.htm*.

quoi, je me vautrais dans l'illusion, ajoutant en cela un peu de la mort sur la mort" (137). This illusion that she and her mother can easily switch from one social class to another is presented as an impossibility within the post-colonial African social class system, and Beyala doesn't hesitate to expose this fixed element of African identity which Assèze struggles with until the end of her narrative. Even though she insists that she has "conscience de ma condition" (99) while living in Awono's house, she continuously and unsuccessfully attempts to defy the established social positions. The power of the "fonctionnaires déjà corrompus" (13) left behind by colonialism reinforces the differences between social classes and creates a false sense of progress and order, "un progrès surnois," (16) based on a past long gone.

Nowhere is this "griserie de modernisme" (16) more obvious than in Awono's household, an ancient German administration building that ironically now has a neon sign where the German flag used to stand. Everyone in the family acts as if they are rich, yet as Assèze eventually realizes, things are not as they might appear at first glance:

> Les choses n'étaient pas aussi brillantes que je l'imaginais à mon arrivée. La demeure n'était pas un palais mais des anciens bureaux de l'administration allemande et l'on devinait encore, sous la peinture verte recouvrant les portes, leurs vieilles plaques d'administration. (96)

Assèze notices that the colors of the walls clash with each other, that the kitchen appliances don't even work, that there are holes on the floor where enormous roaches come in, and that the windows are broken and missing shades. When it

rains, water goes everywhere making Amina's job even more arduous to which she exclaims: "Riches mon cul, oui! Sont même pas fichus de réparer leur fenêtres!" (96). Their riches are not spent in maintaining their house but in trying to maintain their "French" or European appearances. Even though they do live in an ancient German building, they are not able to fill in the shoes of their predecessors, and their corrupt attempt to do so eventually leads them to ruin.

This fixation on the ancient colonizer is one of Beyala's biggest critiques on African society, and in *Assèze* she exposes both a post-colonial abandonment complex and a continuous dependency on the "First World" that keep her people from progressing.[156] In the village, where the narrator admits "nous étions abandonnés à nous mêmes," (27) the only thing the people retained from colonialism was "une éternelle soumission envers l'administration, une méfiance d'écureuil, un respect profound pour la richesse, une volonté de chiendent." (18) In the city, the dependency on the European world, or what the narrator sarcastically calls "le caractère fraternel et indissoluble de la néocolonisation," (66) is exposed through the many products consumed by Africans, none of which are made at home. When she arrives in Douala, Assèze is quick to note the power of this capitalism as she describes the European presence in the city:

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[156] Using a psychology study entitled *La névrose d'abandon* by Germain Guex (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris, 1950), Frantz Fanon applies the term "abandonment neurosis" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 72) to discuss this dependency experienced by Blacks due to colonization. This theme is common in earlier Francophone novels like *L'Enfant noir* by Camara Laye*, L'Aventure ambigüe* by Cheikh Hamidou Kane*, and Mission Terminé* by Mongo Beti.

> …en face le *Lido Bar*, à droite *Chez Dior*, aux vitrines grillages, où s'entassent pêle-mêle, des crèmes à défriser destinées à aplatir les cheveux en trente minutes, des piles de Wax de Lomé, des cartes postales illustrées, des djellabas made in Hong Kong, des pansements pour cors du docteur Scholl. (66)

These products are obviously targeted to the Americans, Belgians, and French, as well as the wealthy Africans, living in this area, but as Assèze continues down the same street, she points out that the less affluent Africans who shop at Monoprix and Prisunic "imitent leurs confrères blancs" even if they are just "vaguement hommes d'affaires, voyous sur les bords, et tout au fond pouilleux." (66) As they look out the windows of the *Ramsec Hôtel*, these men "singent le Blanc et affichent au milieu de leurs indigestions diverses un mépris envers le peuple du trottoir." (66) This "mépris" does not stop here but is continued as a vicious cycle when the poor people from the street looking into the hotel's windows, "muets d'envie, […] se balaient les uns les autres du même regard méprisant que celui qu'ils reçoivent des Nègres en vitrine." (67)

The social difference propagated by this neocolonialism becomes much more evident when Assèze finally reaches the "quartier du bas," where houses are built with "les débris de la civilization" such as

> cartons en violente décomposition, fils barbelés crochus, énormes plaques cuivrées griffées aux noms de quelques anciens combattants morts pour la France, tôle ondulée, boîtes de Guigoz, vielles roues de bicyclette, une poubelle hérissée d'affiches publicitaires: "RIEZ PLUS BLANC AVEC COLGATE"; "BASTOS, LA CIGARETTE DES CHAMPIONS!" (68)

In this part of Douala, people live like in Assèze's village, in poverty, with no electricity, and abandoned by "civilization." She realizes that the city is not all glitz and glamour as she explains: "Je venais d'atteindre le partage des eaux, un cosmos bien organisé avec deux sphères superposées, dont l'une était l'antichambre du paradis et l'autre la cuisine de l'enfer." (68)

This sharp social class difference is maintained by the corrupt post-colonial government which Awono, Assèze's adoptive father, is a part of. At first, Assèze admits she was ignorant about the corruption and believed in the goodness of the government which had as she explains "doté chaque sous-préfecture d'un bus, d'une école et d'un bar. On pouvait y boire du beaufort et danser jusqu'à l'aube." (107) It is Amina's constant preaching about the government's corruption and the unhappiness of the people that start opening her eyes to the reality of her country. Even Sorraya herself admits that her father is corrupt and that all the money he spends does not cost him a dime: "De toute façon, ça ne lui coûte pas un centime! Ce sont les contribuables qui payent! Les fonctionnaires de ce pays sont corrompus. Personne n'y trouve à redire." (89)

In one occasion, Assèze clearly profits from Awono's corruption, and she is fully aware of it at the time. When the school teacher tries to fail her, all Awono has to do is offer to give him a Mobylette (just like the one the White priest uses at the beginning of the novel) and immediately Assèze is placed at the top of her class. In retrospective, Assèze does not excuse herself but feels she had

no choice because of her dependence on Awono and her simply being a product of her time:

> J'étais consciente de ce que s'était passé. Mais mon indépendance tcha-tcha était prisonnière de mon confort. Si j'avais été indépendante, j'aurais décliné le problème de la corruption sous divers angles et j'aurais compris qu'à long terme, j'en serais morte comme un oiseau qui se perd dans le ciel. (123)

The one person who does stand up to the country's corruption and sticks to his beliefs even if it costs him his death is the new Maître d'Ecole who replaces the one who got the scooter and who does not hesitate to fail almost the entire class, including Assèze. This man who lives in poverty, "en plein coeur du partage des eaux," (170) chooses to dress in the traditional African clothes even though the students' parents object to this lack of "formality." Both the students and their parents do not want things to change but prefer the "French" way of dressing as well as the ability to influence their children's grades. At one point, the students turn against their teacher chanting La Marseillaise and refusing to sit down. The new teacher does not give up but simply enforces more and more discipline making the children hate him increasingly. The narrator admits their ignorance kept them from seeing the true intentions of this man: "S'ils avaient vu, ils auraient compris que les insultes de Maître d'Ecole, sa ténacité à répéter inlassablement les mêmes choses avaient pour cause le souci de leur avenir." (149) Unfortunately, the vision of the Nouveau Maître d'Ecole is not fulfilled since he is murdered, probably by an unhappy father or student who cannot look

beyond the fixed way things have always been, again killing any hope of progress in Africa.

Assèze's discovery of this corrupt world ends up exposing her own selfishness and lack of involvement. At times, she realizes it and feels ashamed, yet continues to play her new part. At one point she compares herself to la Comtesse who is too comfortable enjoying the benefits of being Awono's lover to leave him: "J'avais l'air de m'en foutre. En réalité, j'étais bouleversée. Ne m'étais-je pas laissé prendre au piège comme la Comtesse en vivant dans le luxe? Je tremblais d'humiliation coléreuse." (126) She does not realize it at the time, but she is just like Sorraya who is completely self-absorbed in her own fantasy world: "La réalité est trop sale! disait-elle (Sorraya). Ce qui se passe au Liban, en Palestine ou en Afrique du Sud ne m'intéresse pas du tout." (97) Even as she criticizes Sorraya for being "delicate," (97) "une déesse offensée," (108) and many other sarcastic comments, Assèze also refuses to get involved in any aspect of the civil war brewing outside her "palais:" "A peine les manifestants se regroupaient-ils que la police les dispersait. J'estimais que ce n'était pas mon problème. J'avais assez de soucis." (184) She has infiltrated this world of luxury and comfort, even if it is just an illusion, to the point of not being able to detach herself from it and see the reality of her country:

> Je n'avais pas d'opinion. Il est vrai que certains taxis menaçaient le silence de leurs cornes jaunes toutes proches, au rythme de leur klaxon; ils est vrai que de grosses mamans aux lèvres charnues passaient pas loin en hurlant; ils est vrai aussi qu'à travers la ville, de grandes flammes

> s'élevaient avec leurs rafales et leurs nuages et, malgré ces événements qui se déroulaint dans mon univers réel, j'étais comme plongée dans une autre existence, celle-ci plus basse, dont les bords n'étaient pas coupants, mais émoussés. (207)

Her inability to feel the intensity of this historical moment and become part of it is due to the fact that she has been given a role (Awono's adoptive daughter) and even though she is not treated equally to Sorraya, she has been consumed by this performance. Her fixed position in this society has already been dictated by Awono who has decided she will be a seamstress, whereas Sorraya will go to Paris to finish her studies. It is not until Awono's death that Assèze attempts to challenge and break free from this fixed social class even though she still continues to follow in Sorraya's footsteps by going to Paris.

The "piège" that has kept Assèze from being totally free will be unmasked once she arrives in Paris. The decision to go to France is crucial for Assèze since, as Fanon explains: "[Once in France] the Black man finds his "real face there." Yet it isn't a "real" face that Assèze finds but the understanding of the performative nature of her own self. She observes those surrounding her in Paris and realizes that "tous, épaves, exilés, mystiques, révolutionnaires, Blancs, Noirs, nous poursuivions déséspérement la même chimère" (266). This illusion is the notion that everyone has a fixed identity – "Black" or "White," and as Assèze continues infiltrating the world of African immigrants, who "demeuraient exilés [...] à la conquête de la modernité" (234) and who insist that her skin is too black (243), she finally finds her "real face" when she encounters Sorraya in Paris –

something she ironically describes as "purement de l'invasion" (324).

It takes a lot of different experiences in Paris for Assèze to realize the conditioning and performativeness of all her actions. She first arrives in Paris with nothing and nowhere to go, but eventually finds a room at Madame Lola's building where hundreds of illegal African immigrants live. She rooms with three African women, les Débrouillardes, who insist that Assèze's physical appearance, especially her skin color and hair texture, needs to conform with what they have been made to believe to be acceptable:

> Non, cette sauvagerie, avait besoin d'être domestiquée, un coup de hache, un baume de "Skin Succèss,"de défrisant "Capi Relax," de "Gentel Traitment," de gel, de brillantine. […] A les écouter parler, le programme de mise en beauté était infernal et je mesurais par sa complexité le handicap d'être africaine à Paris. D'énormes nuages passaient sous mes yeux et exprimaient la malédiction d'être noire. (244)

Assèze goes along with all the cosmetic changes these women have in store for her and has no involvement in the matter, admitting to have been "effacée dans l'entreprise." (253) She plays along with their game of "acting" White and even has some fun with it. On one occasion, they all go down to the Saint-Honoré faubourg to the "grands couturiers" and pretend to be rich African princesses just so they can try on the expensive dresses. One of the Débrouillardes explains the game to Assèze, who initially does not get the plan insisting they have no money: "Ils ne le savent pas, dit Fathia. C'est pas inscrit sur notre visage." (281) The fact that their performances work without a problem at the Dior boutique exposes the ease of constructing an identity whether self-created or imposed, as well as the

power of money over skin color:

> Notre supercherie fonctionna à merveille. La vendeuse s'empressa. Elle nous prenait certainement pour la dernière fournée du harem de Sa Majesté Salamalek, roi tout-puissant des Etats bananiers réunis. Elle avait des choses hors de prix à nous vendre. (280)

Unfortunately, the self-assurance that the Débrouillardes perform at the store does not carry on to their real life. They believe they need a White man in order to succeed, just like Miss Bamy, "la reine de la beauté black," (243) who became very rich after marrying a Frenchman. They focus all their energy in trying to seduce their boss who has no interest in them: "Elles le désiraient parce qu'il était le contremaître mais, plus que tout, parce qu'il était blond et qu'elles avaient pour la blondeur et les yeux bleus une soumission qui leur venait du bas-ventre." (252) Assèze does not participate in this sad fixation but finds it ridiculous and futile. This is ironic since she will sink much lower for the love of a man who pushes her to become a beggar. While in Douala, Océan, Sorraya's boyfriend, seduced Assèze and left her behind to follow Sorraya to Paris. All he cared about was becoming a successful musician, and when he and Assèze find each other again in Paris, he doesn't hesitate to use her for money. She ends up humiliating herself by begging at the metro so she can help him out, as she explains:

> Rendez-vous compte! Je dansais devant une foule en mal d'exotisme, avec des masques gentils ou inquiétants. Je faisais le singe, le poirier, la diseuse de bonne aventure. Les Blancs se marraient parce qu'ils croyaient goûter au gâteau sucré des mystères africains. (301)

This satirical tone found often through out the novel shows how Beyala enjoys attacking her own people as well as making fun of the Whites. These performances again not only show the ease of creating different identities but also expose the ignorance of the White observers who can be duped into believing in an "authentic" Black culture. Regarding this belief, Beyala asserts that "la culture "black" n'existe pas, ce n'est qu'un mot inventé par les Blancs pour se donner bonne conscience."[157] In Sorraya's case, she falls for this idea once she realizes she cannot be accepted as White and thus plays up her "Africanness." She throws big dinner parties and "toute habillée africaine" (331) prepares large amounts of African dishes and insists that everything be "African" to which Assèze replies: "Je vois pas ce que ça changerait à ton africanité si tu mettais un peu de nourriture française à table!" (331).

Sorraya cannot take control of her mixed identity and refuses to take responsibility for her choices. She blames her father for her unhappiness and eventually suffers a mental breakdown:

> J'ai toujours appartenu à une minorité, reprit-elle. Vous ne m'acceptiez pas, parce que j'estimais que j'avais certain droits, que tout n'était pas bon dans nos traditions. En France, j'appartiens encore à une minorité. Jamais je ne serai considérée comme Blanche. Je n'appartiens à rien. Une hybride. Un non-sens! Tout est de la faute à papa. (339)

Regarding this inferiority complex, Frantz Fanon asserts that this experience "is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must

[157] Régnard *www.afrik.com*.

struggle with it increasingly."[158] This is precisely Sorraya's predicament since she attended a private expensive French school where she was exposed to many French thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Baudelaire, and Sartre. In addition, as a Black woman who is made to feel doubly inferior, "she aspires to win admittance into the white world"[159] and thus surpass one of her inferior positions, that of race. Nevertheless, she is unable to reach her "chimère" of "passing" as White or of feeling part of one of the given "identities" offered to her by society. She explains to Assèze that what she has is called "une dépression" (345) and that it doesn't have a name in Africa. Again, the Western world has a specific label for a very complex symptom, which Sorraya feels she must use in order to secure some kind of position. She then proceeds to play out this depression and, with Assèze's help, commits suicide.

The decision to let Sorraya die is a very conscious one that Assèze makes after having realized she has herself been conditioned by Sorraya:

> Là, elle m'ouvrait l'esprit. Je compris brusquement que tous mes actes avaient été conditionnés par cette femme, dès le jour où elle m'avait reçue sur le palier de la maison de son père, enveloppée dans un peignoir, là-bas, à Douala. Mon amour pour Océan, ma venue en Occident, mes couics et mes couacs de soupirs, de larmes, tout ça avait été conditionné pas Sorraya. (320)

It is at this moment of awareness that she is able to escape the trap of the constructed identities that had kept her from being free for so long. In reliving

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[158] Fanon, *Black Skin* 25.
[159] Fanon 60.

these moments of self-discovery, she also comes to realize that all of her decisions to follow these fixed repressive identities reflect a bigger problem, that of her continent's own actions: "Je me rends aujourd'hui compte que je m'étais engagée sans clairvoyance. J'avais agi dans le flou, miroitant des possibilités de réussite et autres vanités du même genre. J'étais comme l'Afrique dans ses décisions, j'agissais au coup par coup, sans mûre réflexion" (315).

This mature reflection is what Beyala seems to believe Africa needs in order to rid itself from what Assèze calls its "néfastes instincts" and "dispositions bagnardes" (341) which keep the continent in such a shameful state. "C'est un peuple qui me fait honte car nous sommes les seules au monde à ne pas pouvoir nous en sortir," says Beyala of her people.[160] She believes that in order to recover Africa's "jeunesse sacrifiée, la génération perdue," Africa as we know it today must be destroyed in order to be rebuilt. Thus, after Assèze desperately asks herself: "Quand cessera [mon peuple] d'avoir honte?" (287), she proceeds to let Sorraya die, thus killing the one obstacle keeping her from achieving personal freedom. Just like in *Soleil* , as Adèle King explains, "celle qui meurt [...] donne à la femme vivante le moyen de continuer, parce qu'elle est maintenant douée d'une identité double."[161]

Another obstacle to freedom Beyala has been successful both at

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[160] Matateyou 613.
[161] Adèle King, "Calixthe Beyala et le roman féministe africain," *Carrefour de Cultures: mélanges offerts à Jaqueline Leiner* (Tübingen: Narr, 1993) 104.

infiltrating and dismantling is that of the construction of gender identity which keeps women in particular bound to repressive roles. Just by taking the pen in her hand and writing she is already defying these roles since, "pour la femme africaine, écrire c'est se placer volontairement en marge de la société."[162] Even in *Assèze*, the protagonist's mother echoes the society's beliefs that "femmes des livres, c'est comme des femmes qui deviennent des hommes à force de faire du sport" (134). Nevertheless, in both her literary work and other personal projects, Beyala has been able to challenge such constructions by giving women new options to society's restrictive definitions of femininity including beauty and sexuality as well as the role of motherhood. Her many "provocative" propositions speak both to the African community as well as to the western world and have sparked a range of reactions from both literary critics and feminists. The reaction to her first two novels in particular was highly controversial due to the potential lesbian innuendo behind them. Beyala admits that Africa is "un continent très pudique et très puritain,"[163] and she doesn't hesitate to shake it up. Richard Bjornson, for example, believes that "Beyala's lesbian approach to the reality of contemporary Cameroon is unusual within the context of the country's literate culture."[164] Ndachi Tagne adds that in Beyala's first novel "Ateba's homosexual

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[162] Beatrice Rangira Gallimore, *Le renouveau de l'ecriture feminine dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala: Afrique Francophone Sub-Saharienne* (Paris. L'Harmattan. 1997) 15.
[163] Gallimote 191.
[164] Richard Bjornson,*The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and the National Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 420.

yearnings […] will raise an outcry from a number of African readers," and even goes as far as saying that readers will be scandalized by its "pornographic" content.[165]

On the other hand, some critics see the female relationship of Ateba and Anne-Claude in *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlé* as the positive "erotic and (un)spoken moment of/for lesbianism".[166] In addition, as King concludes, "l'attrait sexuel entre femmes est enfin moins important que la puissance de révolte que la femme recèle."[167] Even though Beyala has adamantly denied any claim of lesbianism in her work insisting that "le mot lesbienne n'existe pas dans le lexique africain,"[168] the presence of homoerotic feelings and insinuations in her work challenges fixed sexual definitions. As Juliana Makuchi explains in her study of gender in African women's writing, "Beyala wants to distance the limited sexual meanings by which "lesbianism" is often defined for possible cultural, political, or other personal reasons."[169]

Whatever the reasons for wanting to liberate sexual definitions, Beyala wants to unite women in friendship and solidarity in order to empower them. Since her first and more controversial novel, she seems to have toned down her

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[165]David Ndachi Tagne, Revue of *C'est le Soleil qui m'a brûlé* by Calixthe Beyala, *Notre Librairie* 100 (Jan.-Mar 1990): 97.
[166] Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997) 94.
[167] King 104.
[168] Gallimore 197.
[169] Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi 164.

feminist/lesbian agenda in order to more carefully and cleverly infiltrate and denounce violently the necessary institutions and challenge the treatment of women both in Africa as well as world-wide. She may call herself "l'Africaine typique," but as Adèle King argues, Beyala's novels "ne sont typiques ni de la littérature africaine ni du féminisme occidental."[170] They open up the female readers' eyes to different and progressive possibilities and challenge patriarchal definitions of femininity.

In *Assèze*, for example, the mediation of identities does not stop with the racial Black vs. White performances. She also infiltrates the construction of female identity – even though at times it does go hand in hand with that of race (as in the single word "Africaine" of the title). For example, Sorraya who feels "White" also reads Simone de Beauvoir and believes that "[a]ucune femme ne peut prétendre devenir une femme si elle n'a pas lu Simone" (78). Assèze is confused by all this talk about women's rights calling it "une théorie bizarre sur l'émancipation de la femme" (78), and towards the end of the novel she has doubts of even being a woman since she feels her "womanhood" is not even in her own hands:

> Ce qui me perturbait par-dessus tout, c'était mon propre état de femme. Je n'étais plus sure, en réalité, d'en être une […] A supposer que ceux qui étaient détenteurs de mon bonheur et de mon titre de femme se réveillent un matin et décident que je n'en étais pas une, que deviendrais-je? (343)

All these doubts and complex feelings are a product of Assèze's

[170] Adèle King 101.

infiltration and experiences within different social settings both in Africa and in France. In her village, for example, the women insist that Assèze is wasting her time studying since "les diplômes d'une femme n'ont jamais servi a rien!" and even when women think they are free, they never really are (134). Assèze's mother, on the other hand, insists that there are women "qui travaillent et qui restent de véritables épouses" (134) and pushes Assèze to follow a more liberated position. Thus, in order to "neutraliser ces mauvaises langues" (134), she sets out to do it all by waking up at the break of dawn and performing the necessary role to fit in this particular world. She performs all the designated female housekeeping roles gaining the admiration of the other women in the village: “Quelle fille! Andela a de la chance!” (134).

Back in the city the stage is different, yet the struggle with defining femininity is still present. The tension between La Comtesse (Awono's lover) and Sorraya reveals how unresolved this identity is for Assèze who doesn't know whether to side with "la pute" (the slut) or with Sorraya who adamantly (and very ironically since she will later get pregnant and have an abortion) refuses to tolerate such behavior and who firmly states: “Jamais je ne serai une pute quelles que soient les difficultés que je rencontrerai dans la vie. Mais lorsqu'on est habituée à être une poupée entretenue comme la Comtesse, on finit par trouver la chose naturelle. Alors on est prise au piège" (126). Nevertheless, the one trapped in this world is Sorraya herself since La Comtesse has managed to maintain some

level of control over her fate as a woman in African society. Whenever Assèze is finally expelled from school, la Comtesse clearly explains to Awono women's options in Africa:

> Elle n'ira plus à l'école comme les femmes mariées, les jeunes filles qui sont sacrifiées au profit des garçons. Elle n'ira plus à l'école comme les putes de ce pays que tu baises, Awono et tu voudrais l'y envoyer comme l'infime minorité de femmes que t'arrives pas à baiser. (168-9)

Even though la Comtesse never went to school and admits she is a "pute," she manages to be the one in control in her relationship with Awono making him do anything she wants. This presents Assèze with somewhat of a powerful female role model who has managed to turn the system to her own advantage. La Comtesse is completely free from the duties of a wife and goes wherever she pleases. She does not put up with any abuse from Awono, but leaves him whenever he does not defend her honor in front of the rest of his family. She has no problem finding another lover to give her anything she wants, but Awono begs her to return to him offering her the world. She does not even have a sexual relationship with him towards the end, but continues to enjoy the luxury of Awono's status.

Nevertheless, la Comtesse is far from being a perfect role model since she eventually does need a man to support her. Beyala's far from perfect female characters avoid what Maryse Condé sees as the African temptation to create perfect heroes/heroines to please the readership, a process that only serves to create fixed and unrealistic definitions of identity:

> [E]xiger des écrivains des héros positifs nous paraît hautement dangereux. Cela conduit à un dirigisme littéraire qui risque d'entraîner la sclérose du créateur, son mutisme ou la naissance d'une littérature où le slogan tiendrait lieu de pensée.[171]

Beyala's many strong female characters do opt for alternate styles of living and struggle with society's imposed female roles. Like la Comtesse, most of them do not have any problem refusing the imposed female role of motherhood and thus claim control over their own bodies. The power of the role of motherhood in Africa is clearly expressed when Assèze explains that "chez moi, quand une femme est stérile, son mari la quitte ou en épouse une autre" (329). From the beginning of the novel, Assèze refuses a traditional idea of motherhood but would rather care for other people's children: "Je crois que j'aurais été une bonne mère mais cette idée me donne des cauchemars. Si je le pouvais, j'adopterais des enfants. Je suis convaincue que la maternité est dangereuse" (20). When Sorraya becomes pregnant, both Assèze and la Comtesse overcome their differences and they all come together to help Sorraya get an abortion. This abortion scene not only serves to show the power of female bonding, but it also exposes the physical dangers women undergo because of society's intolerance. Sorraya almost bleeds to death, and Beyala does not hesitate to describe the abortion scene in detail concluding that the procedure is as antiquated "comme l'aurait fait n'importe quel illustre médecin du XVIIIe siècle" (182). Regardless of this danger, the women's choice to refuse motherhood in whatever fashion is a

[171] Maryse Condé, *La parole des femmes* (Paris: Harmattan, 1979) 76.

strong message from the Cameroonian writer as Obioma Nnaemeka concludes:

> Beyala challenges the yoking of womanhood and motherhood in Iningué society by delinking and problematizing the woman/mother twin. Beyala's strategy reinscribes the many faces of womanhood. Unlike most African writers in whose works the abandonment of motherhood is unthinkable and unpardonable (Emecheta, Bâ, Nwapa), Beyala's novels make the abandonment of motherhood as an institution both a possibility and an act of freedom/self-definition.[172]

In addition, Beyala's work empowers female characters by giving them agency to narrate themselves into any particular identity. "Son oeuvre constitue une célébration de la femme comme narratrice de sa propre histoire."[173] Through this agency, Beyala's own belief in the superiority of women over men and in their responsibility in changing the world comes through. She believes that "il est maintenant temps que la femme africaine prenne le pouvoir politique" since men have been incapable of taking Africa forward in the thirty years after independence.[174] Nevertheless, she explains that it is women who mostly oppose her views and who participate in destroying what she calls "la féminité:"

> J'entends par féminité la condition de la femme perçue comme phénomène englobant entre autres l'être physique, psychique et spirituel de la femme. En outre, je pense que la femme est un loup pour la féminité pour plusieurs raisons. C'est la femme qui décide de l'excision d'un femme, ce n'est pas un homme. C'est la femme qui dit à sa fille qu'elle est un objet soumis à l'homme.[175]

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[172] Obioma Nnaemeka, "Imag(in)ing knowledge, power, and subversion in the margins," *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, identity, and resistance in African literature,* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 17-18.
[173] Adèle King 102.
[174] Gallimore 197-8.
[175] Ibid.

Another element of this "féminité" besides sexuality and motherhood Beyala has managed to infiltrate is the definition of beauty and erotica, particularly that of African women. Besides the fact that "la femme africaine [...] est l'être humain au monde qui a le plus de problèmes," Beyala believes that "le phantasme érotique relié à la femme noire n'arrange pas toujours les choses" as she explains:

> Quand certains hommes me rencontrent, ils se disent "c'est une femme noire, on peut sortir avec elle". Après, il se heurtent à un cerveau et il faut qu'ils réajustent leur jugement. ça demande beaucoup de temps. Imaginez ce que cela peut donner pour des femmes qui ne sont pas forcément des intellectuelles ou des écrivains.[176]

This statement would seem very ironic considering her controversial promotion of the book *Black Ladies* (1995) which consists of nude photographs by German photographer Uwe Ommer of African women. Critics like Gallimore defend Beyala against any attacks of commercializing African eroticism in her work,[177] yet it is hard not to question her involvement in such projects.

In her introduction to *Black Ladies*, she is quick to defend her position by praising the *beauty* of Black women and joining in a hymn "qu'obscurément tassés sur nos préjugés, nous aurions balbutié:"

> Pourquoi ne serait-il permis à un photographe du Nord, de chanter la beauté plastique de la Femme Noire? Pourquoi l'inspiration créatrice que la splendeur Africaine engendre en des poètes comme Senghor, ne

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[176] Mouellé Kombi 11.

[177] Beatrice Rangira Gallimore, "Le Corps: de l'alienation à la réappropriation chez les romancières d'Afrique noire francophone," *Notre Librairie* (117) 60.

toucherait-elle pas Uwe Ommer?[178]

The women in these photographs are young and progressive modern African women, like Beyala, and they show their power through these images which are far from objectifying. Just like Beyala has used her writing career as a tool to infiltrate both African society and the West, projects like *Black Ladies* infiltrate obsolete definitions of beauty, eroticism and exoticism and dismantle them from within. Unlike the Débrouillardes in *Assèze* who battle with becoming "beautiful" à la Miss Bamy, these women celebrate their Blackness and empower Black women like Beyala, who admits to have rediscovered herself in these pictures as "Femme Africaine dans cet extraordinaire agencement de beauté et de puissance, de douceur et de grace."[179] Similarly in *Assèze,* the one female character who is able to achieve self-freedom is Assèze, who even though she does marry Sorraya's husband and struggles with her newly discovered sense of self-worth, is able to overcome society's imposed definitions of femininity and accept who she is inside and out.

In his book *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha explains how the image of identity is "at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence, and by that same token a metonym, a sign of absence and loss." The title of Beyala *Assèze l'Africaine* is itself exactly this – an "edge of meaning and being, a shifting

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[178]Calixthe Beyala's introduction to Uwe Ommer's *Black Ladies* (Taschen America: New York, 1997) no page number.
[179] Ibid.

boundary of otherness within identity." Assèze's awareness of this mediation of identity that occurs through performing certain constructed roles is what sets her free. She embodies this "in-betweeness" of identity by finding in her what she calls a "God" who "n'est ni blanc, ni noir, ni Afrique, ni Occident" (348).

Besides her complex characterization and plot development, there is a lot to be said as well for Calixthe Beyala's narrative style which also infiltrates the French language and brings her readers closer to this level of "in-betweeness." Even though she insists that in her writing she is speaking mostly to the African community admitting that she shocks "beaucoup plus les Africains puisque ce message s'adresse d'abord à eux,"[180] her narrative style is able to infiltrate the western world, especially the French, with a multicultural progressive agenda. She explains that her writing is mostly Cartesian,[181] but her use of an "Africanized" French language subtly injects a good dose of Africa into the French reader. She explains that it is difficult to "retranscrire un langage parlé, véridique," and thus admists that she subjects the French language "à [ses] traditions, à [sa] culture, à [ses] visions"[182] thus creating what she calls "le français de demain" or "une langue métissée."[183] She also adds:

> Pour moi, le français n'est pas seulement la langue de Baudelaire, il est aussi la langue des Africains, en ceci que nous pouvons la retransformer, la pressurer et la recharger de notre culture, et ainsi en faire ce que nous

[180] Matateyou 605.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Mouellé Kombi 11.
[183] Matateyou 606.

voulons.[184]

In *Assèze l'Africaine*, there are several examples of hybridity in style and of this new cultural space Beyala speaks of. Assèze herself explains that at school the French language "était mis[e] à la page au son du tam-tam, aux ricaments du balafon, aux cris des griots," (93) and many times in her narrative, she uses African imagery, injecting part of this culture into the French language. For example, as she describes the August sun, the description is charged with African vegetation and animals:

> Il (le soleil) ne s'étirait plus sur l'étendue des forêts avec la pesanteur d'un boeuf qui se couche. Il ne grillait plus les tiges jusqu'à les rendre cassantes. Il ne pénétrait plus les feuillages avec les vrillements sinueux d'une vipère. (58)

In addition, she uses African types of comparisons to add a certain texture to her narrative as when she returns to her village and compares herself to "cette race de girafes qui, pommelées de complexes, se montent le cou pour mâchonner quatre feuilles au sommet du snobisme" (133). When she realizes she cannot change her origins nor her color in following Sorraya, she sees this impossibility "comme si un batôn jeté dans l'eau se transformait en poisson" (72).

Besides these subtle images, Beyala also includes certain details of African culture, which might be shocking to the Western reader, but she simply glances over them without much explanation or emotion. This matter of fact attitude seems to lower the reader's anxiety level and make it seem as something

[184] Gallimore 190.

totally natural. The clearest example of this tactic is when Assèze mentions in passing the virginity test she goes through:

> Grand-mère s'acharnait à faire de moi une épouse. Tous les mois, je subissais l'épreuve de l'oeuf. Grand-mère me déshabillait et me demandait de m'accroupir. Elle introduisait l'oeuf dans mon vagin pour voir s'il pénétrait. Après, en récompense, j'avais le droit de manger cet oeuf. (28)

The Africanization of Christianity is also present in different ways. Even if the clever adaptation of the Christian names Maria and Joseph is presented in a humorous way, the reader can see the effects of colonization and the struggles that came with it. Since all the girls want to be named Maria-Magdalena ("Elles ne voulaient pas s'appeler Maria. Ce prénom simple sonnait inquiétant." p. 37) and all the boys Joseph, the villagers have to adapt these names in order to not have 300 Josephs and 600 Maria-Magdalenas, as the narrator explains: "Il nous fallu l'ingéniosité de nos ancêtres pour s'en sortir. On composa des Joseph-le-grand, Joseph-le-court, Joseph-le-droitement, Joseph-double-langue, Maria-Magdalena-pieds-gâtés ..." (37).

The presence of Africanized Christianity is mostly evident in the injection of African dance and culture into the description of a Catholic mass. The narrator lets the reader know that it is not until the end of the ceremony that this "messe devenait intéressante" since in the people's eyes the priest would become something of a vaudou priest to whom they could relate much better and thus perform a more africanized ritual:

> Des femmes toutes habillées de blanc dansaient le *tenk-a-touk* tandis que les bouches s'ouvraient et que les paumes claquaient l'une contre l'autre pour donner de la mesure. D'autres Négresses tout aussi hardies tiraient des cochons glapissants par des laisses et les offraient au prêtre. (121)

The people then proceed to ask the priest for specific favors like help with their troubled children who disobey them. The priest does not hesitate to join in these practices as long as he can infiltrate his own rightous beliefs into the village. Beyala again uses satire to denounce the French presence as the priest practices a sort of violent exorcism on the children who are at the end so scared that they stop being bad, as Assèze explains: "C'était évident: le prêtre faisait des miracles, car après de telles taloches, des taloches d'une main blanche, la peur cinglait tellement leur coeur que les enfants ne recommençaient plus" (122).

In addition, Beyala does not hesitate to freely discuss certain things, which both in Western *and* African societies might be taboo like women's menstrual periods (53) and venereal diseases in young boys. The episode where Assèze's friend Paul catches the "chaude-pisse," or the clap, is particulary humurous and subtly exposes the ignorance of these children in a society that fails to instruct them in sexual matters:

> Nous comprenions sa souffrance car nous étions convaincus que nous devions tous passer par cette puanteur pour nous affranchir sexuellement. Nous étions également convaincus que Paul devait assumer cette chaude-pisse comme un combattant ses blessures de guerre. (109)

Such uses of humor throughout Beyala's novel also serve to infiltrate both cultures, and as the prominent Algerian writer Azouz Begag explains, humor

shortens the distance of the intercultural space and "peut être considée comme la forme ultime de ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui avec beaucoup de réserve – tant il est devenu obsolète –l'intégration." [185] Writers like Beyala who are are able to take part in *both* cultures with great ease "jouent de leur double appartenance pour produir du 'télescopage humoristique'."

> Les questions relevant de l'immigration, des étrangers, des Autres… étant génératrices de sentiment d'insécurité et d'une distance entre 'nous' et les 'autres', l'humour, dès lors qu'il emporte l'adhésion du public dans sa diversité, s'offre comme un espace de respiration, de légèreté, de sécurité, bref de rencontre. Il réduit dès lors l'écart entre les identités…ou bien dit autrement, il crée un espace commun d'identification. [186]

In Assèze, humor and satire are present from the first moment the African and Western worlds meet as the villagers "spéculaient sur l'épouse que père Michel choisirait. Au train où ils allaient, père Michel aurait bien douze enfants" (35). The Grandmother's insistence to the priest that "Ma petite Assèze s'appellera Jésus" (38) can be found humorous by either a French or an African reader. When the priest finally gives her the option of the name "Christine," the old lady's ignorance of Christianity continues to be used as a source of humor as she questions the priest about this name in the following dialogue:

– Ça signifie quoi, Christine? – Celle qui porte le Christ, répondit père Michel.
– La femme de Jésus, alors? demanda de nouveau Grand-mère.
– Non, répliqua père Michel. C'est le féminin de Christ.
– Sa maîtresse alors? redemanda Grand-mère.

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[185] Azouz Begag, "L'humour comme distance dans l'espace interculturel," Colloque at the French and Italian Department, University of Texas at Austin, Spring 2002.
[186] Ibid.

Excédé, père Michel répondit: – C'est tout comme. (38)

As seen above, the villagers' ignorance is often a source of humor as when one village girl confuses the model number of a car for its price and insists that Assèze has nothing to brag about since cars are not expensive at all: " «Si, insista Maria-Magdalena. Papa a vu un magasin de voitures et c'était marqué Simca 1100! Je vous jure! » «1100 francs pour une bagnole? Mais pourquoi qu'elle vient nous pomper l'air alors? » conclurent les autres." (135)[187]

A similar misunderstanding can be found when Mama-Mado's confuses the word *avocat* (lawyer) with *avocat* (avocado). When someone suggests she will need a lawyer (avocat) to save her land from being developped by the government, she puts as many avocados she can find around her store and is certain this will do the trick: "Ils pourraient pas traverser avec tous ces avocats..." (130).

Her humor can also be found in the form of reversals which put the White characters, and consequently the White reader, in the position of Other. For example, when the priest arrives at the village he is humorously described as something bizarre and foreign: "Paraît que ça a pas le zizi coupé!" "Quelle horreur! Et comment qu'ils font alors?" (29)

> Je traversai la bande de gosses en jouant du coude pour voir ce qui sentait si mauvais et que je n'avais pas encore senti. C'était un Blanc. Oui, il paraît qu'il sentait […] J'approchai mon nez et reniflai. (29)

[187] In this exchange, it is clear how the writer's use of hip Parisian French slang comes through even though the characters speaking are African villagers.

Comments like "l'enfant d'un blanc c'est quand même un enfant" whenever Sorraya is about to abort her baby, and "Je sais ce que les Négres pensent de la danse classique. Ils disent que ce sont des singeries de Blancs qui connaissent de la danse autant qu'un chien!" (113) when Sorraya defends her ballet dancing, clearly reverse the subject-object position. At one point Assèze finds "les Blancs beaux à faire peur" (67) which sounds more like a comment coming from a White person about Blacks.

Les Débrouillardes themselves also opt to laugh to cope with their state of difference and misery in France, and the book ends with them all laughing together with Assèze and giving a spark of hope to their situation: "Et elles éclatèrent de rire. Je sais qu'on rira encore longtemps car, peu à peu, j'oublierai l'histoire […] Le reste ne sera plus que temps qui passe, temps qu'il fait. Et on rira." (349)

In order to arrive at such joy by breaking the cycle of misery and suffering experienced by so many like Sorraya, there needs to be a true revolution in the way Africans view themselves both at home and abroad. Beyala seems to warn that continuing to follow a supposed pre-determined path, like in the case of most of her characters in *Assèze*, leads to "the risk of finding in the end that what has been gained is illusory."[188] Assèze, who finally has the guts to let Sorraya die, takes on a truly revolutionary role and thus decides "d'abandonner tous les

[188] Fanon 210.

mythes et de revenir à la vraie exigence révolutionnaire qui est d'unir action et verité, pensée et réalisme."[189] Calixthe Beyala herself embodies this "vraie exigence révolutionnaire" and by focusing on the predicament of African women living in France, she empowers them and exposes a reality that has for too long been overlooked and undersestimated.

[189] Sartre, "Materialisme et révolution" 183.

Chapter 3: Edwidge Danticat's Diasporic Voices from the "Beyond" Rethink Creoleness and Identity

In North American society, the mention of Haiti in the media usually consists of negative stereotypes of boat people, extreme poverty, corruption, AIDS and the often misunderstood practice of voodoo. As Alex Stepick sets out to show in his book on Haitian immigration, "negative stereotyping of Haitians is hardly new or peculiar to Haitian refugees."[190] Most of these negative stereotypes have been constantly fed to the public by journalists who do not understand the Haitian culture and often misrepresent the facts. In his 1974 book, anthropologist Sidney Mintz already acknowledges that "few countries in modern times have received as bad press at the hands of foreign observers as Haiti."[191] Twenty years later, the medical doctor and anthropologist Paul Farmer also maintains this position: "At worst, journalistic writing about Haiti distorts events and processes in predictable ways, helping to perpetuate a series of particularly potent myths about Haiti and Haitians."[192] In her candid article on misconceptions of Haiti, Amy Wilentz as well expresses her frustration towards this "wall of incomprehension that has long existed between Haitian subject and non-Haitian viewer" and traces this inability to penetrate and understand Haiti to memorable

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[190]Alex Stepick, *Pride against Prejudice: Haitians in the United States* (Needham Heights, Mass: Allyn and Bacon, 1998) 2.
[191]Sidney W. Mintz*, Caribbean Transformations* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974) 267.

photographs "seized on by foreigners during colonial days and during the U.S. occupation. They are images that ratify received wisdom in the outside world."[193] These images have been for so long internalized in our society that in the United States more specifically, as Michael Dash explains, there exists a "Haitianizing" of Haiti as "unredeemably deviant:"

> American intentions to reshape, control and dominate Haiti because of the latter's threat to its interests, are sustained by an imaginative grid of stereotypes through which Haiti is filtered into America's consciousness.[194]

With more than a million Haitians now living both in the U.S. and Canada, books like Stepick's consequently seek, in a somewhat scientific manner, to "dispel the negative stereotypes of Haitians and replace them with more accurate images of a people suffering prejudice yet maintaining pride in themselves and their culture."[195] In addition, post-colonial Haitian writers living in France, the United States and Canada have been struggling to "de-colonize" these repressive images by re-presenting and re-constructing both Haitian identity as well as that of their "host" countries.[196] Literature by writers like Edwidge Danticat, who

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[192]Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti* (Monrode, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1994) 45.
[193]Amy Wilentz, "A place called Haiti," *Aperture Magazine* No. 126 Winter 1992 entitled *Haiti: Feeding the Spirit.*
[194]Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988) 137.
[195]Stepick 13.
[196]Edwidge Danticat's most recent project is the editing of *the butterfly's way: Voices from the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States,* a poignant anthology that brings together thirty-three Haitian-Americans of different generations and backgrounds who share their experience of being in two places at once and who wish to dispel any misconceptions of Haiti. For a powerful essay on

lives in New York and writes in English, goes beyond the persistent themes of exile, alienation and growing estrangement from home and deal with the positioning of identity in the construction of "place" or "the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place."[197] Ultimately, this process leads to a "radical rereading of old stereotypes [which] allows for an unprecedented exploration of scepticism and cultural relativism."[198]

Danticat left Haiti at the age of 12 in 1981 to join her parents in the U.S., just to find a very charged anti-Haiti environment with AIDS appearing more on the scene and dead boat people being washed onto the Florida shores almost daily. She recalls being often attacked by her classmates whose limited knowledge of Haiti was that of "boat people, stinking Haitians, and Frenchies:"

> All they knew was that Haiti was a country that people left in tiny boats and risked their lives across a deadly ocean to come to the United States, to be picked up by the Coast Guard and then either imprisoned or returned to their country. All they knew about Haiti was what the news said every night in those months of the spring of 1981, that a certain group of people had AIDS: among them homosexuals, hemophiliacs and Haitians.[199]

She recalls one incident at school when she and a group of fellow Haitian kids decided to use a common stereotype in order to protect themselves from the

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Haiti always being referred as ""the Poorest Nation in the Western Hemisphere" by the media, see Joel Dreyfuss's "A Cage of Words."

[197]Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 9.

[198]Dash 162.

abuse. They knew that along with the many misconceptions the other children had about them was that of Haiti and voodoo, so "the Haitian students all agreed to carry red handkerchiefs and spread rumors that the red handkerchief had spells in them."[200] Their little scheme worked, as she recalls, "reaffirming our solidarity."[201]

The strong solidarity among the Haitian immigrant community in the U.S. has helped so many survive and succeed outside of their country of origin. Danticat admits that without the support of both her family and her church there is no way she could have reached the success she has now:

> I think that if I had gone to a different school in a place where I couldn't have gone back to my Haitian church on Sunday I would have failed. If I was successful at Barnard, it was because I was still able to return to the people who always supported what I did.[202]

Indeed her success has been great and very sudden as well. Since the publication of her debut work *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994, at the age of 25 Edwidge Danticat quickly won the praise and recognition as one of America's brightest young writers. She actually began writing this novel when she was still in high school after writing an article for a New York City teen newspaper about her leaving Haiti and coming to the U.S. as a child. She graduated in 1990 from

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[199]Edwidge Danticat, "Haiti: A Bi-Cultural Experience," A lecture presented at the Inter-American Development Bank on Dec. 7, 1995, as a part of the IDB Cultural Center's Lecture Series, *Encuentros*, No. 12, Dec. 1995, p. 4.
[200]Ibid.
[201]Ibid.
[202]Zoë Anglesey, "The Voice of the Storytellers: An Interview with Edwidge Danticat," *Multicultural Review* 7(3) September 1998, 38.

Barnard College, where as a French literature major she spent a year in France and translated as her senior thesis a part of Maryse Condé's 1994 *Moi, Tituba sorcière noire de Salem*. Her first novel was actually an adaptation of her Master's thesis which earned her an MFA from Brown University in 1993.

Breath, Eyes, Memory has earned her great critical acclaim and awards which include a Granta Regional Award for the Best Young American Novelist, a Pushcart Prize and fiction awards from *Essence* and *Seventeen* magazines. She was chosen by *Harper's Bazaar* as one of the 20 people in their twenties who will make a difference, and was featured in a *New York Times Magazine* November 1994 article entitled "30 artists, 30 and under...likely to change the culture for the next 30 years." In addition, in 1998 this book hit the "literary lottery" by being chosen for the June selection of the *Oprah Winfrey Book Club,* which could only mean one thing: sales. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* shot to No. 1 on the Publishers Weekly paperback best-sellers list and in three months there were already 600,000 copies in print.

Her 1995 short story collection *Krik? Krak!* as well was very successful making her a finalist for the National Book Award in 1995 and *People Magazine's* choice as one of the "Best of Pages" for that same year. Some of these stories can be found in such anthologies as *Rhythm and Revolt: Tales of the Antilles* (1995), *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967 to the Present* (1995), *The Whistling Bird: Women Writers of the Caribbean*

(1998), *The Best American Essays 2000, Giant Steps: The New Generation of African American Writers* (2000), *Beacon's Best of 2001: Creative Writing by Men and Women of All Colors* (2001), and many others. Danticat herself has been involved in editing such collections as *Beacon's Best of 2000: Creative Writing by Men and Women of All Colors* (2000) as well as *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States* (2001).

As can be noted by her diverse literary involvement in which she has been incorporated into different "categories" such as American, African-American, Haitian-American, Caribbean, Black, etc., Edwidge Danticat is part of a strong and vibrant multicultural literary world which she defines as "an inevitable reality," and she goes on to describe her complex positioning:

> It's something that a lot of individuals carry, but the writers express in words. We try to explore what it is through our work. Julia Alvarez has an amazing essay in which she talks about "writing the hyphen" – being of two cultures but on both sides having to say you are exclusively neither. [203]

She has a "deep sense of questioning about how we do label ourselves and who labels us,"[204] and when she is asked "What do you consider yourself? Are you Haitian? Haitian-American? Caribbean? etc.," she has no reservations with her answer and does not exclude *any* part of herself: "The truth is I am all these things: Haitian, Haitian-American, a citizen of the Americas, of the Caribbean.

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[203]Ibid 38.
[204]Danticat, "Haiti: A Bi-Cultural Experience," 5.

Afro-Caribbean. Afro-American."[205] She may seem thus to identify with the *Créolité* literary movement of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, who, as Danticat herself extensively quotes their *Éloge de la Créolité*, believe that Caribbean people are neither

> Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians...We declare ourselves Creole...aggregate of Caribbean, European, Africa, Asian and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history. For three centuries the islands and parts of continents affected by this phenomenon proved to be real forges of new humanity, where languages, races and religions, customs, ways of being from all over the world were brutally uprooted and transplanted in an environment...to reinvent life. Our Creoleness was therefore born from this extraordinary *migan* ...[206]

The rhetoric of *Éloge* seems to go well with Danticat's positioning, yet it unfortunately also tries to dictate, and thus limit, the Antillean writer's mission saying it should be that of "chercher nos vérités."

> Affirmer que l'une de missions de cette écriture est de donner à voir les héros insignifiants, les héros anonymes, les oubliés de la chronique coloniale, ceux qui ont mené une résistance tout en détours et patience et qui ne correspondraient en rien à l'imaginaire du héros occidentalo-français.[207]

As Maryse Condé explains, the problem with the *Créolité* supporters is that they tend to succumb to a colonial obsession which continues to keep them "prisoniers de l'opposition binaire: créole/français."

> Celle-ci n'est qu'un héritage de l'obsession coloniale entre vainqueur et victime. Faussement révolutionnaire, cette dichotomie linguistique est en réalité passéiste et nie les découvertes fontamentales sur l'ordre et le pouvoir sociétal impliqué dans toute langue.[208]

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[205]Ibid 6.
[206]Ibid 5-6.
[207]Quoted by Maryse Condé in *Penser la créolité* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1995) 309-310.
[208]Ibid 309.

Condé goes on to criticize Raphaël Confiant who in *Eloge* reproaches Aimé Césaire for not having written in creole, and she asks "Ne sait-il pas qu'il suffit pour l'écrivain de trouver son langage au-delà des langues, maternelles ou non?"[209]. With so many Caribbean immigrants all over the world, writers are increasingly opting to express themselves in the language of their adopted land. With this said, Condé insists on the outdatedness of any binary positioning and for the openness of other possibilities:

> L'écrivain antillais n'est plus natif-natal et donc n'est plus créole au sens où on l'entendait au XVIIIe siècle...et dans *Eloge de la Créolité*. N'y a-t-il pas des versions multiples de l'Antillanité? Des acceptions nouvelles de la créolité?[210]

One of these multiple versions is the work of Edwidge Danticat, and in this chapter I will specifically look at her 1995 short story collection *Krik? Krak!* with brief references to her other works. By exploring the world of the multiple diasporic voices in her stories, I will show how this young writer both re-thinks *créolité* to a new and more vibrant concept as well as how she re-defines Haitian identity through what Homi Bhabha calls "the realm of the *beyond*" – the "au-delà" or "in-between" space in which one finds "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" that lead to the negotiation of "the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value."[211] In Danticat's work, both the strategies of representation and the content of her

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[209]Ibid.
[210]Ibid 309-310.

narratives work together to expose the plural Haitian identities which displace the monolithic, hegemonic fixed categories of gender, race, and nationality. From the first to the last story, the short story collection is an actual journey through the process of how Haitians, and women more specifically, move from a small village to the city of Port-au-Prince and eventually to the United States and how through this journey fixed labels are continuously challenged and dismantled. "Our identities expand," she explains, "the more places we go, the more it expands, the more we add to our own *Créolité*."[212]

Taking on her roll as storyteller, and an excellent one at that, Edwidge Danticat prefaces *Krik?Krak!*[213] with an epigraph from a fellow Haitian-American, Sal Scalora, Director of the Benton Museum at the University of Connecticut and Associate Professor of Sculpture. In his poignant article "White Darkness/Black Dreamings," Scalora speaks openly of the corruption in Haiti and the struggle of its peasants to survive, and Danticat quotes the following passage in her preface:

> We tell the stories so that the young ones will know what came before them. They ask Krik? we say Krak! Our stories are kept in our hearts.[214]

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[211]Homi Bhabha *Locations of Culture* 2.
[212]Danticat, "Haiti: A Bi-cultural Experience," 6.
[213]Krik? Krak! (New York: Soho Press, 1995). All further citations will be with page numbers ot this edition.
[214]Sal Scalora, "White Darkness/Black Dreamings," *Haiti: Feeding the Spirit* in *Aperture Magazine*, No. 126, Winter 1992, 73.

This traditional Caribbean (and African) opening for storytelling, where the older and more wiser person has the answers, elicits the participation of the listeners or readers who themselves become collaborators in the story. The title of the book thus invites the reader to become a part of Storytelling which Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as "the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community" and, specifically talking about writings by "women of color," she comments:

> She who works at un-learning the dominant language of "civilized" missionaries also has to learn how to un-write and write anew. And she often does so by re-establishing the contact with her foremothers, so that living tradition can never congeal into fixed forms, so that life keeps on nurturing life, so that what is understood as the Past continues to provide the link for the Present and the Future.[215]

In 1995, at the young age of 28, Danticat who has been described by a fellow Haitian as "an old soul"[216] and who is viewed by many as a Haitian spokesperson, takes the pen in her hand and re-writes the past and present of the very diverse, yet always interconnected, Haitian diaspora by interweaving different narrative voices with varying experiences and thus giving voice to all of those who would otherwise remain silent, especially women. When asked how she feels about being a role model or a representative of her culture, Danticat humbly rejects this task simply stating that she is a "weaver of tales" and quoting

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[215]Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 148-149.

[216]Renee Shea, "Traveling Worlds with Edwidge Danticat," *Poets and Writers Magazine* Jan/Feb 1997, 44.

Frantz Fanon on national culture saying: "Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it."[217] To this she adds:

> I hope to speak for the individuals who might identify with the stories I tell [...] There are millions and millions of Haitian voices. Mine is only one. My greatest hope is that mine becomes one voice in a giant chorus.[218]

With Danticat, as the famous Caribbean writer Paule Marshall concludes in the back cover of *Krik?Krak!*, "A silenced Haiti has once again found its literary voice." Danticat remembers the difficult times she and her family endured in Haiti during the Duvalier regime explaining "I just remember a lot of silence,"[219] and she does indeed break this silence through the Haitian diaspora voices she brings to life in her work which is in English yet tries to capture "so much of Creole," as she explains "so that our voices can still come across, so that people can recognize a different voice even if I'm translating myself when I write."[220]

Through this "translation" or a re-writing of the self, as well as through a recognition of the Other against this translated Self, a process of (re)negotiation of Haitian identity is bound to occur leading to the emergence of a "new" Haitian identity which is constantly being recreated. The rejection of the French language is part of this recreation since Danticat is part of a Haitian diaspora living in the U.S. that chooses to express itself either in English or Creole or a mix of both as

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[217]"A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat" in *www.randomhouse.com/vintage/danticat.html*.
[218]Ibid.

she explains: "At home we always spoke Creole. With my brother, we speak something of a mix, but we never really spoke French at home."[221] She remembers having to struggle with the French language in Haiti and getting in trouble at school for speaking in Creole: "It was like Creole was something you could not do in offices."[222]

The writer's choice of language, as Danticat herself admits, "is seen as a political choice, so [it] is extremely politicized."[223] This is very often the case considering many people see "the choice of language [as] a form of exile."[224] More specifically talking about Haitian writers who write in French, Leah Hewitt sees the use of this language as both ambivalent and alienating:

> When only ten percent or less of the Haitian population over age fifteen can speak French, when almost half of the population over age fifteen can't read, the French writing Haitian no doubt feels at least somewhat cut off from fellow compatriots, whether he or she has managed to remain in Haiti or has fled abroad.[225]

For Danticat, who as a child "kept journals written in fragmented Creole, French, and English,"[226] the use of English has been seen by many as a conscious political choice by the writer.[227] Those who wish she would write in French could

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[219]Ibid.
[220]Ibid 48.
[221]Ibid 47.
[222]Ibid 48.
[223]Zoe Anglesey, "The Voice of the Storytellers," 39.
[224]Leah D. Hewitt, "La créolité 'Haitian Style,'" *Penser la créolité* 240.
[225]Ibid.
[226]"A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat," www.randomhouse.com/vintage/danticat.html 2.
[227]This observation stems from personal experience at Francophone conferences where I have presented papers on Danticat and have received a somewhat hostile francophone audience who believes Danticat should write in French.

simply be expressing neo-colonial desires. Nevertheless, Danticat sees her choice of English as a simple "consequence of migration:"

> I came to English at a time when I was not adept enough at French to write creatively in French and did not know how to write in Creole because it had not been taught to me in school, so my writing in English was as much an act of personal translation as it was an act of creative collaboration with the place I was in.[228]

She goes on to comment that if she'd migrated to Spain, she would probably be writing in Spanish.

Even though she does write in English, the presence of both her Creole and French influences are undoubtedly in her work both in the style and content of her writing. In her discussion of Danticat's use of Creole, Miriam Chancy sees the subtle uses of this language as an invitation to "cultural doubleness" since the reader many times is under the illusion of reading in English when "the text is in fact a creole one."[229] Chancy describes Creole with its multiple meanings as "a living language that is continuously changing; it accurately reflects a culture that is constantly in flux."[230]

Danticat explains that her first "literary" influences "were actually oral: [her] grandmothers and aunts and the stories they told, both in the structural forms

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[228]Ibid 3.
[229]Myriam Chancy *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 130.
[230]Ibid.

of folktales and in the informal conversations they had with each other."[231] This oral feeling of Creole is very present in her work which she sees "as a primal scream. In reality the work is close to the oral, but it also uses the tools of books that we've read."[232] Again, she relates to the Creole movement finding Patrick Chamoiseau's work very interesting because "he is not denying that, 'Yes, I am using the language of Victor Hugo, but it is as valid as the woman in the village who tells stories in Krèyol.'"[233]

It is interesting to note that the first use of French in Danticat's first novel is within an official paper, a testament: "*La terre sera également divisée*, she read the document."[234] Besides the fact that, as Danticat has said, Creole is not used in offices, this statement also reflects a sense of division and *not* inclusion which seems to reflect a more colonial memory of French. In addition, regarding the preference of English over French in a more modern Haitian literature, Michael Dash believes that these writers "attempt to write themselves into existence" to "retrieve themselves imaginatively," and he concludes:

Writing the novel in English, the language of the other, affords an eloquently taciturn defiance of a traditional Haitian literary rhetoric which can be identified with a kind of masculine audibility and copiousness. If French is the language of

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[231]A review by Penguin Putnam of *The Farming of Bones*, as well as an interview with Edwidge Danticat about the novel in *http://www.penguinputnam.com/static/rguides/us/farming_of_bones.html*.
[232]Zoe Anglesey 39.
[233]Ibid.
[234]Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (New York: Soho Press, 1994) 167.

political authority and literary tradition, then English has become [a] code of genuine feeling.[235]

For any diaspora, this "self-retrieval" is a complex process, since as James Clifford explains "the signifier *diasporic* denotes a predicament of multiple locations."[236] Thus Danticat admits "she is hardly expert in a culture that, as is true for many emigrants, grows more significant as it grows more remote,"[237] yet she does not see this position as a complete dilemma or disadvantage but rather an enriching experience:

> I think being an immigrant, you get to look at both your own culture and the culture you come to with fresh eyes. This is a great point of observation from which to examine both cultures, a very good space from which to write. I write both about Haiti and the United States as an insider/outsider. This makes me work harder to understand both cultures. I take nothing for granted about either place. Everything I write starts with my own personal quest for a better understanding of both places and their different cultures. [238]

This positioning is clearly present in the diasporic voices in Danticat's short stories who do speak from different places and serve as bridges between "here" and "there" as well as between "then" and "now." Even though not all the characters are immigrants living in the U.S. like Danticat, in one way or another they are a part of, or are connected to, what she calls the "floating homeland" or the "tenth department:" "Haiti has nine departments and the tenth [is] the floating

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[235]Michael Dash 161.
[236]James Clifford, "Diaspora," *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (1994) 319.
[237]Erin J. Aubry, "Two Articles on Edwidge Danticat from the L.A. Weekly," in *http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/literature/danticat2.htm.*

homeland, the ideological one, which joins all Haitians living in the *dyaspora*."[239] There are so many Haitians living outside their country that most people left behind in Haiti have either a sister or a brother or someone they know living either in the U.S. or some other country. The contact is never lost and this connection is very alive in *Krik? Krak!* where at some point most of the characters are either from a small town called Ville Rose or have family who once lived or still lives there. All their voices and lives are intertwined from story to story and generation to generation, and their experiences are shared not only between and among them, but by the reader as well. Through memory and the retelling of old stories and legends both within each individual story and through the story itself, the Haitians in Danticat's tales are remembered and thus achieve immortality.

From the first short story, "Children of the Sea," the combination of voices and experiences is the most immediately evident. In this probably the most acclaimed of the stories, Danticat interweaves place and gender through alternating love letters (or diary entries) between two lovers. Even though these letters are never sent or received due to the tragedy surrounding them, what matters is that they are written and through them the heartbreaking experience of

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[238]A review by Penguin Putnam of *The Farming of Bones*, as well as an interview with Edwidge Danticat about the novel in *http://www.penguinputnam.com/static/rguides/us/farming_of_bones.html*.

[239]Edwidge Danticat, Introduction to t*he butterfly's way: Voices From the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States* xiv.

this lost youth is brought to life by Danticat – giving a face and a deep sense of humanness and suffering to Haitians who have remained back in their homeland as well as all the "boat people" often on CNN in the 1980's and early 90's.

The fact that both lovers remain nameless makes the reader's process of recognition of this humanity much easier. The unnamed man, a young zealous rebel on a sinking small boat bound to the U.S. with "thirty-six other deserted souls," (3) has left his lover behind in Haiti where she witnesses the increasing violence of the Tonton Macoutes, the militia of the Duvalier regime. We learn from the woman's letters that this young man on the boat is a bright student who has just passed his baccalaureate exams and thus would seem to have a promising future ahead of him. Nevertheless, the violence of a war-torn country has not even let him find out these results and let alone enjoy them.

From the beginning of this story and throughout all of Danticat's work, there is always present a combination of the horrific, with violence and evil images, and what one critic calls "the butterfly kiss on the forehead of her lyrical descriptions, her dreamlike interludes, the floating sense of magic realism."[240] In one same paragraph for example, the young man of "Children of the Sea" describes the horrors of being cramped in the tiny boat and trying to go to the bathroom. Somehow, the writer manages to turn this horror into sweetness:

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[240]Christopher John Farley, "Review of *Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat," *Time Magazine* Sept. 1998, vol. 152, p. 78.

> It is so demeaning having to squat in front of so many people. People turn away, but not always. At times I wonder if there is really land on the other side of the sea. Maybe the sea is endless. Like my love for you. (15)

The combination of the two lovers' beautiful feelings for and memories of each other and the constant mention of butterflies with the disgusting smell of the boat as well as the horrific atrocities in Haiti, keeps the work from exploiting the macabre appeal of this terrible situation. Nevertheless, the violence of the Duvalier regime is not taken lightly as the writer takes great care not only to show this corruption but also to expose the many effects this violence can have on *all* Haitians, rich and poor, far and near.

From the young woman's letters, we learn a lot about her family and their social situation. They are clearly bourgeois since they are fleeing from the city to their vacationing home in the village of Ville Rose where her father is from. The tension between rural and city life is also very evident since she explains that her mother's "whole family did not want her to marry papa because he was a gardener from ville rose and her family was from the city and some of them had even gone to university." (22-23). The father's character is one of the most complex and interesting of *Krik? Krak!* not only because of the tension between social classes but because of his interaction (or lack of) with the Haitian militia. He is caught between his manhood (not giving in to the Tonton Macoute bullies) and his responsibility to protect his family (making sure his daughter doesn't get taken in because of her ties to the rebels).

In the first letters, the young woman is angry at her father because he disapproved of her relationship with the young man who had a controversial radio show and was a member of a youth federation. The tension between the two generations increases from letter to letter until the daughter learns the real reason for their flight to Ville Rose as she explains on a letter:

> manman told me the whole story today under the banyan tree. the bastards were coming to get me. they were going to arrest me. they were going to peg me as a member of the youth federation and then take me away. papa heard about it. he went to the post and paid them money, all the money he had. our house in port-au-prince and all the land his father had left him, he gave it all away to save my life. (24)

As shown above, the young woman's letters do not have any capital letters. It is interesting to note as well that she begins her first letter in French: "haiti est comme tu l'as laissé" (4) which again lets the reader know that she speaks French and thus is educated. The fact that all of her letters are not capitalized at all and are an obvious contrast with the young man's also exposes the "minuscule" or subjugated position women have in Haiti regardless of their social class. Regardless of the father's helplessness faced with the corruption of his country, he has the power over his wife and daughter and exercises it freely. At one point, as they hear the soldiers killing one of their neighbors, the mother wants to go outside and intervene to try to save her. The father refuses and "grabs her neck and pins her to the latrine wall."(16) The fact that he cannot control the world outside his house makes him much more possessive and abusive within and the young woman discusses this dynamics in one of her letters:

manman says it is not his fault. he is trying to protect us. he cannot protect us. only god can protect us. the soldiers can come and do with us what they want. that makes papa feel weak, she says. he gets angry when he feels weak. why should he be angry with me? i am not one of the pigs with the machine guns. (13)

The abuse of women is present through out all of Danticat's work, but their strength shines as well. The letters of the young woman are in small letters, but they are in bold type as well. In all her work, the writer takes great care to show the resilience and power women have within the Haitian community. In this particular story, the mother-daughter bond serves to give both women the strength they need to cope with their situation, and their separation from the patriarch figure seems almost conspiring:

she whispered under the banyan tree in the yard so as not to hurt his feelings. i saw him looking at us hard from the house. i heard him clearing his throat like he heard us anyway, like we hurt him deeply somehow just by being together. (23)

Besides a glimpse at women's situation in Haiti, Danticat also manages to shine a new light on the stereotype of voodoo, which is thought by so many to be practiced by everyone in Haiti. There are very subtle yet revealing statements throughout both lovers' letters which dismiss any such stereotypes. The young man writes about there being "a lot of Protestants on this boat. A lot of them see themselves as Job of the Children of Israel. I think some of them are hoping something will plunge down from the sky and part the sea for us. They say the Lord gives and the Lord takes away." (7) It is interesting to note that Danticat was brought up by her uncle who was a Baptist minister in Haiti and she herself is a very active member of a church called Evangelical Crusade Fishers of Men in

Brooklyn. This is an interesting contrast with the common misconception that if you are Haitian you are either Catholic or practice some kind of voodoo. The number of Protestants in the U.S. is higher than in Haiti, which is also an interesting effect of immigration. As Alex Stepick confirms in the case of South Florida, "nearly 40 percent of the recent refugees are Protestants, substantially higher than the estimated 15 to 20 percent in Haiti."[241]

Nevertheless, the presence of African roots and voodoo in most Haitians' everyday life is also expressed in Danticat's work. As Stepick explains, "because of the overlap in Christian and African beliefs, some aspects of Voodoo pervade all of Haitian culture:"

> A Haitian cliché states that 90 percent of Haitians are Christians and 100 percent believe in Voodoo. For many this simply means that a Christian who goes to church weekly will also have an embroidered pillow with the name of Ezili, the goddess of love. For those who more actively participate in Voodoo, Christianity and Voodoo are compatible beliefs.[242]

This compatibility is very present in "Children of the Sea" where the young man believes in a combination of religions or practices as he prays on the boat. Firstly, as he is on the boat looking at the empty horizon, he expresses his belief in *Ginin*, or Guinea in Africa, from where the Voodoo spirits are said to originate: "I feel like we are sailing for Africa. Maybe we will go to Guinin, to live with the spirits." (14) Later, he throws some money into the sea "as an offering to Agwé,

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[241]Alex Stepick 85.
[242]Ibid 88-89.

the spirit of the water," (20) and then says "Jésus, Marie, Joseph! Everyone smells so bad." (21) He also has a dream of mermaids "dancing and singing in Latin like the priests do at the cathedral during Mass," (12) and later both beliefs are clearly combined in his last thoughts:

> Perhaps I was chosen from the beginning of time to live there with Agwé at the bottom of the sea. Maybe this is why I dreamed of the starfish and the mermaids having the Catholic mass under the sea. (27-28)

It is assumed from the woman's last letter that the young man's boat does sink, but what is important is the fact that all those who perished are not simply erased from the face of the earth and forgotten but are grieved for and remembered in the last story "Caroline's Wedding" which takes place in New York City and seems to be the closest to "home" for the Haitian diaspora.[243] This story brings us back to the first one by means of a dead Haitian refugee who drowned on the same boat our earlier narrator was in. This woman *is* given a name (Célianne) in the first story thanks to the letter the young man writes to his girlfriend, where he explains Célianne's tragic outcome after she gives birth to a baby on the boat. Since the baby either is dead at birth or dies on the boat due to the terrible conditions, she is forced to throw it overboard. She then jumps and drowns herself. Consequently, in the last story, two Haitian women (mother and daughter) attend a Catholic Mass for Célianne even though her name is unknown to these characters. How they know the story about the dead baby and her suicide is never

[243]This story will be discussed in detail at the end of this chapter.

explained and this is not what is important. What matters is that she *will* be remembered.

Danticat wrote "Children of the Sea" after several talks with Haitian "boat people" at Florida detention camps, and as she explains, their biggest fear was "disappearing without a trace. If you die in the middle of the ocean no one will know. [T]here is no grave to visit."[244] Thus Danticat makes sure that Célianne is grieved for in "Caroline's Wedding" and that through her, all the others that were on that same boat get a voice and a name:

> The altar boy stood in an arc around the priest as he recited a list of a hundred twenty-nine names, Haitian refugees who had drowned at sea that week. The list was endless and with each name my heart beat faster, for it seemed as though many of those listed might have been people that I have known at some point in my life. (167)

There is some truth to this last statement since, as stated before, all the characters share the same past and the connection to Ville Rose. Nevertheless, in order for this past to be shared between the first and the last stories, Haitian identity must be negotiated through what Homi Bhabha calls a "restaging of the past"[245] since at some point all these stories take place in Haiti either in a specific distant past (1937) or a past which would be easily recognized by the Haitian diaspora. By recreating the past and breaking with the continuum of past and

[244]Shea 48.
[245]Bhabha *Locations* 2.

present, Danticat's stories "create a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation."[246]

> Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.[247]

"Children of the Sea" ends with the female narrator and her family living in the town of Ville Rose away from the chaos and corruption of Port-au-Prince, but the book slowly takes us from rural Haiti to the city as well as from present to past. In the next story "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," the narrator who lives in Ville Rose, takes us back to a specific time and place very alive in the Haitian community's memory. At the time of writing this story, this place was for Danticat only a "mental landscape"[248] of the site of the 1937 massacre of thousands of Haitians by the Dominican Republic dictator Trujillo. This event later inspired Danticat to go even further into her renewal of the past in her acclaimed 1998 novel *Farming of Bones*.[249] In this work, the voice of the narrator is actually a polyphonic creation of the author who had help from "a lot of collaborators" as she says – people who would find out of her novel and would send her personal things like "the phone

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[246]Ibid 7.
[247]Ibid 2.
[248]Shea 48.
[249]This title is from a Creole expression used by the cane workers referring to their shredded skin after a grueling day's work brushing against the razor sharp edges of the cane.

number of someone who has information, copies of birth certificates and letters of survivors."[250]

However, in the second story of *Krik? Krak!*, even though the 1937 massacre serves more as background to the injustices of the government, Danticat uses the personal stories of her characters to re-construct the past and bring to life the horrors of the massacre. On re-writing history or writing about a historical event, Danticat comments: "I have always been fascinated by history, but the kind of history that's told by ordinary people; that to me is the biggest story of history/herstory, the personal narrative."[251] Thus, her narrator brings to life her mother's story, a woman who has been sent to prison for being a "*lougarou*, witch, criminal" (39) since by "flying" over "the Massacre River, the river separating Haiti from the Spanish-speaking country" (33) she was able to survive the 1937 massacre. The prison, located in Port-au-Prince, forces the narrator to move from a more secure peaceful rural environment, to a place "où s'effectuent la déchéance progressive du corps féminin et le musellement du langage."[252] She has to struggle with two very different worlds, one mystical and familiar to one of violence and sterility:

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[250]Ibid 49.
[251]Zoë Anglesey 36.
[252]Andree-Anne Kekeh-Dika, "Entre ville et village: Quelles destinées pour le féminin chez Edwidge Danticat?" *La Ville plurielle dans la fiction antillaise anglophone: L'Image de l'interculturel*, Corinne Duboin and Eric Tabuteau, eds. (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2000) 59.

La violence de la ville est figurée également (sans surprise) par les soldats anonymes qui sillonnent l'espace textuel, ou par la présence diffuse d'une "loi" répressive, celle qui a pour charge d'exclure ou d'admettre le féminin au sein de la ville.[253]

This horrible world of abuse is combined with the familiar stories the women in her family have shared regarding the 1937 massacre. The narrator herself was born on the very day Trujillo ordered all Haitians living in the Dominican Republic to be massacred, but her mother was only recently imprisoned because someone had accused her, out of spite, of being a witch. The brutal treatment of this poor woman in the prison is combined with a sense of survival that the recreation of the 1937 massacre brings. This recreation is definitely surrounded by supernatural and fantastic elements such as the woman's interaction with dead women from the past who visit her to give her strength and guidance as well as a crying statue of a Madonna. This presence as Myriam Chancy has noted, serves as another "vehicle through which identity is articulated and affirmed. Counter to Western ideology, imagination is rendered factual rather than false, a key to the real rather that its mere shadow."[254] This tension is actually exposed through the daughter's rejection or doubts of her mother's abilities to both "fly" over the river and to make the Madonna cry. The story begins with the Madonna shedding a tear and the narrator thinking her mother had died. The

[253] Ibid.
[254] Chancy 12.

narrator much later in the story, shatters the reader's imagination with her logical explanation of the statue's tears:

> I know how the Madonna cries. I have watched from hiding how my mother plans weeks in advance for it to happen. She would put a thin layer of wax and oil in the hollow space of the Madonna's eyes and when the wax melted, the oil would roll down the little face shedding a more perfect tear … (42)

In addition, the fact that the narrator actually asks her mother if she had flown over the river brings into question the possibility of such act. To this question, the mother answers: "Perhaps you don't remember. All the women who came with us to the river, they could go to the moon and back if that's what they wanted." (43)

The mother is speaking of the many pilgrimages they would take to the Massacre River "on the first of November" (41) to pray for those killed back then. Since they are going on this trip on the French celebration of Toussaint, there is also a colonial re-membering that takes place in this story. In addition, besides the massacre itself, this narrative is continuously haunted by the past through overt as well as subtle mentions of different moments in Haitian history. For example, through the actual prison building, the narrator takes us to the American occupation in 1915 by means of a clever association:

> The Americans taught us how to build prisons. By the end of the 1915 occupation, the police in the city really knew how to hold human beings trapped in cages, even women like Manman who was accused of having wings of flame. (35)

The rupture of linearity that comes about from this "restaging of the past" is not only evident in the story but within the book itself and reflects what Clifford calls the "middle passage" that diaspora cultures experience:

> In diaspora experience, the copresence of "here" and "there" is articulated with an antiteleological temporality. Linear history is broken, the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also desired, but obstructed, future: a renewed, painful yearning.[255]

Thus, the narrator is caught in between the two worlds of past and present, logic and non-logic and finally must come to terms with these elements as her mother dies. Even though she does find the answer to her mother's "wings of flame," she does not stop believing in her:

> Then the story came back to me as my mother had often told it. On that day so long ago, … my mother did fly. Weighted down by my body inside hers, she leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river. She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin, which at that moment looked as though it were in flames. (49)

As her mother's body is about to be burned, she holds the Madonna tightly against her chest, so close that she can smell her mother on the statue. Finally, she raises her head towards the sun thinking, "One day I may just see my mother there." (49)

The use of "restaging of the past" as in the case of the 1937 massacre to expose the more eminent present situation of Haiti continues to be found throughout *Krik*? *Krak*!, and more specifically through the exposure of the performative nature of identity as in the following story entitled "A Wall of Fire

[255] James Clifford 318.

Rising." In this story, still taking place in rural Haiti, a very poor couple tries to raise their only son by sheltering him from the hopelessness and despair that surrounds their lives. The young father named Guy cannot find a job and the family has barely enough to eat. On the other hand, his son Little Guy, has a bright future ahead of him, as he attends the Lycée Jean-Jacques, where he is obviously learning French and is a very good student since he has been chosen to play the part of Boukman, an important slave in Haiti's revolution, and the hero in his school play.

From the beginning of the story there is tension between father and son even though the son is just a seven-year-old child. As Guy barges into their tiny shack excited to tell his wife some news, little Guy jumps up and not allowing his father to talk, exclaims "Listen to what happened to *me* today!" (53) As the child proceeds to tell him all about the play, the father, who seems happy for his son, continuously doubts the child's abilities possibly projecting his own insecurities upon him. He comments negatively on the length of the speech ("You're going to spend a lifetime learning those") (54) and on the difficulty of the language ("All these words seem so long and heavy …You think you can do this, son?" (55) The father cannot even say the name "Bouk-man" as he struggles trying to pronounce it, but the mother insists that her son can achieve anything as she cheers him on to recite his speech: "Remember who you are, a great rebel leader. Remember, it is

the revolution." As Guy continuous to question the child's potential, his wife firmly states "He is Boukman." (55)

Little Guy does a wonderful job playing his part for his parents as he recites his speech, which the narrator adds was obviously "written by a European man, who gave to the slave revolutionary Boukman the kind of European phrasing that might have sent the real Boukman turning in his grave." (56) The two young parents are so proud of their son and are taken over with such emotion that they get tears in their eyes:

> As their applause thundered […] they felt as though for a moment they had been given the rare pleasure of hearing the voice of one of the forefathers of Haitian independence in the forced baritone of their only child. (57)

After the boy's father sees the irony in his own lack of achievement, he decides to be daring and steal a hot-air balloon from which he jumps and kills himself. He is not equipped to fly this "Western" modern machine imported form the U.S., and his death symbolizing the frustration of only being able to better oneself through Western knowledge is ironically crowned by his son who "becomes" the Europeanized Haitian hero Boukman and recites his lines next to his father's dead body. Through this performance he can reconstruct an important part of Haitian identity, the Haitian revolution, yet re-inventing it to express the irony of having been the first Black Republic but still being in the mess its in.

Thus, through this restaging of the past, Danticat's work also leads to a re-visioning of tradition – a transformation, or métissage, of all the traditions she

carries with her. Regarding the construction of identity, Stuart Hall insists that "questions of identity are always questions of representation. They are always questions about the invention, not simply discovery of tradition."[256] Danticat certainly reflects this dynamism and would most likely admit that her work in fact does some inventing of its own as she explains: "I think that people create their own folklore. The Haitian experience is wonderful for that."[257]

In the next story of the collection, "Night Women," this invention is clearly present and takes place as a means of survival for a young prostitute, and in turn, it serves to empower this woman through her sexuality. The narrator of the story is a young woman from Ville Rose living with her young boy who, like little Guy in the previous story, symbolizes the hope of Haiti: "He is like a butterfly fluttering on a rock that stands out naked in the middle of a stream." (85) Again, as in the first story "Children of the Sea," the beautiful image of the butterfly is combined with the dark and desperate situation of this poor woman forced to live in the city. It is interesting to note again Danticat's latest project *the butterfly's way,* which is a collection of Haitian diaspora voices. The butterfly as a symbol of hope thus seems to point to a more multicultural and open Haitian generation and to the unavoidable "stop" in the city of Port-au-Prince.

However, the prostitute has to struggle to keep her son on "the butterfly's way," and in order to make a living she has *chosen* to be a prostitute over working

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[256] Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," *New Left Review* 209 (1995): 4.

in the market like the other women as she explains: "I watch the piece-worker women march one another to the open market half a day's walk form where they live. I thank the stars that at least I have the days to myself." (88) This woman is portrayed as a strong independent woman who suffers to bring up her son after the father has abandoned them. As Pascal Dupuy has commented, Danticat seems to have drawn a parallel between the prostitute/mother and Haiti itself,"[258] and this can be seen through out the metaphorical symbolism in the story as well as in the opening lines:

> I cringe from the heat of the night on my face. I feel as bare as open flesh. Tonight I am much older that the twenty-five years that I have lived. The night is the time I dread most in my life. Yet if I am to live, I must depend on it. (83)

This metaphor of "woman as landscape" as Myriam Chancy has noted, has long been a tradition in male Caribbean writers and leads "to a textual romanticization of Caribbean women, which denies them a sense of identity separate from that of island-nations. They are in fact denied the possibility of articulating identities divorced from but still relevant to the politics of colonialism."[259] Danticat on the other hand, refuses to romanticize the woman in her story, yet still uses her to symbolize the plight of her country and the need for women to empower themselves. Thus, as Chancy comments on Danticat's first

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[257] Shea 46.
[258] Pascal Dupuy, "Women of the Night: A metaphor of Haiti's Plight," 1997 website.
[259] Chancy 108.

novel, "Danticat shows that in order to reclaim the landscape of the female body and of Haiti, both must be redefined."[260]

The young prostitute lives in a small shack with her son, and in order to receive her suitors at home while her son sleeps, she has made up a story of angels coming to visit them at night. This is why, she says, she must take such care dressing up since "where angels tread the hosts must be as beautiful as floating hibiscus." (86) Within their home, she and her son are separated by a thin cloth that splits their one-room house "into two spaces, two mats, two worlds." (83) Thus, from the beginning, there is a separation between these two generations, the battered abused one and the youth, "the broom-size of a man," (83) who needs to clean up this mess. The woman's suitors also fulfil a symbolic role as Haiti's two social classes (a rich doctor and a poor musician) who do not seem to be able, or willing, to do much for their country. They both neglect to fix the woman's house simply because of their own personal whims. She explains that she can see "the stars peeking through the small holes in the roof that none of [her] suitors will fix for [her], because they like to watch a scrap of sky while lying on their naked backs on [her] mat." (84)

Thus, the weight of "fixing" these holes will eventually fall on this child's hands who, as little Guy, is going to public school, and the mother comments on him humming "one of those madrigals they still teach children on very hot

[260] Ibid 126.

afternoons … *Kompè Jako, domé vou?*" (87) Again, the French postcolonial presence is very alive in Haiti both within the Creole language and the things they are taught in school, and Danticat does not hesitate to include such lighthearted yet ironic passages to lighten up the grimness of her character's lives. The fact that these children have appropriated a French song and made it "their own" valorizes how they are both a product of a French legacy as well as his mother's myths and stories. As he sleeps, she whispers in his ear all the tales she was told as a child, tales he will carry with him just as he will carry the "Frère Jacques" song and the Coke-can radio he sleeps with:

> I whisper my mountain stories in his ear, stories of the ghost women and the stars in their hair. I tell him of the deadly snakes lying at one end of a rainbow and the hat full of gold lying at the other end. I tell him that if I cross a stream of glass-clear hibiscus, I can make myself a goddess […] I want him to forget that we live in a place where nothing lasts. (86)

Through these stories and myths, the mother can keep alive a part of herself in her son who already has his own "baggage" to carry with the Western influence of his schooling and the inevitable effects of globalization present around him (i.e. the Coke can). All this *mélange* is what will make him unique, as in the case of Danticat herself, and more aware of the complexity of his world which is not just Black and White, but very diverse and multicultural. Nevertheless, just like the writer, he will not forget the bloodshed that has kept his country from moving forward as he sleeps with his mother's "long blood-red scarf around his neck." (84) His mother lets him have it "so that he always has something of [hers] when

[her] face is out of sight." This scarf symbolizes the power of the Haitian diaspora's memory, which keeps so much of the Haitian culture alive even if Haiti is "out of sight."

Trying to keep these memories from Ville Rose alive while living in the sterile and threatening city of Port-au-Prince really comes through in the next story "Between the Pool and the Gardenias," the story that marks the middle of *Krik? Krak!* and brings the entire collection together by mentioning women from all the other stories and letting us know many of their fates. This culminating story, which has been called "l'épitomé de tout le recueil,"[261] gives us a glimpse at the exiled life of Marie, a woman from the country forced to leave her home-town of Ville Rose in order to work as a servant in a luxurious villa in Port-au-Prince. She is literally stuck in this house, the only place she could find (or that is available) for her in the city, thus the title which limits her space to a very defined area and identity. She is prisoner of the stereotypes the bourgeois have of people from the country as she explains:

> "She is probably one of those *manbos*," they say when my back is turned. "She's probably one of those stupid people who think that they have a spell to make themselves invisible and hurt other people. Why can't none of them get a spell to make themselves rich? It's that voodoo nonsense that's holding us Haitians back." (95)

The story revolves around Marie finding an abandoned baby girl who is dead, yet the reader doesn't learn this until much later. The baby is described as an

angel whose "lips were wide and purple, like those African dolls you see in tourist store windows but could never afford to buy." (91) We immediately are introduced to Marie's social class and position within this society since not only can she not afford the dolls, but she also does not/cannot enter this space. This dead baby is the narrator's vehicle for survival as she is able to find refuge in the stories and memories she shares with her. She liberates her voice through her imagination, as she shares all the names she would have given the daughter she was never able to have because of her continuous miscarriages:

> I called out all the names I wanted to give them: Eveline, Josephine, Jacqueline, Hermine, Marie Magdalène, Célianne. I could give her all the clothes that I had sewn for them. All these dresses that went unused. (92)

All these names are names of different female characters in *Krik? Krak!*, and even though it is through a dead baby that all the connections are made, what matters is that all these women and their traditions are kept alive through Marie's memory. She explains to the child the importance of knowing where you come from and who your family is:

> You don't just join a family not knowing what you're getting into. You have to know some of the history. You have to know that they pray to Erzulie, who loves men like men love her, because she's mulatto and some Haitian men seem to love her kind. You have to look into your looking glass on the day of the dead because you might see faces there that knew you even before you ever came into this world. (97)

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[261] Andree-Anne Kekeh-Dika, "Entre ville et village: Quelles destinées pour le féminin chez Edwidge Danticat?" 60.

As already mentioned above, personal histories are much more important to Danticat than any "official" history. The use of storytelling by the narrator leads to a re-living of traditions by re-establishing "the contact with her foremothers"[262] as the narrator desperately "had a sudden desire to explain to [the child] [her] life." (96) She thus brings to life her dead foremothers as she tells the dead baby, symbolically named Rose like the home town of all these women, how "many nights [she] saw some old women leaning over [her] bed" including her own mother:

> Mama had to introduce me to them, because they had all died before I was born. There was my great grandmother Eveline who was killed by Dominican soldiers at the Massacre River. My grandmother Défilé who died with a bald head in a prison, because God had given her wings. My godmother Lili who killed herself in old age because her husband had jumped out of a flying balloon and her grown son left her to go to Miami. (94)

Thus, we not only learn how all these women are connected, but we also find out that little Guy from the third story did leave Haiti maybe following "the butterfly's way." For Danticat, this route to hope seems impossible in the hostile city where the narrator clearly expresses how indifferent and cold it can be. She explains how "even people who come from your own village don't know you or care about you." (95) The poverty and corruption in the city change people and even force many women to "throw out their babies because they can't afford to feed them."

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[262] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 148.

> Back in Ville Rose you cannot even throw out the bloody clumps that shoot out of your body after your child is born. It is a crime, they say, and your whole family would consider you wicked if you did it. You have to save every piece of flesh and give it a name and bury it near the roots of a tree…(93)

Through these comparisons, the narrator revives such traditions which are not continued in the city. Nevertheless, she cannot return to her village since she is forced to leave her home behind because of her "infertility" and her husband's abuse and infidelity:

> The next thing I know, it's ten years with him. I'm old like a piece of dirty paper people used to wipe their behinds, and he's got ten different babies with ten different women. I just had to run. (96)

The impossibility of fulfilling her designated female role of motherhood does not allow Marie to remain in this space. In addition, she is unable to escape the masculine oppression in the city, where the Dominican gardener with whom she sleeps once, is also a repressive masculine presence. Even though he shares her solitude in this strange city, he does not hesitate to call the police on her when he finds her trying to bury the baby in the yard. He is unable to overcome the stereotypes of Haitian women that prevail in the Dominican Republic as well, as he rejects any kind of explanation from her: "'I don't know you from the fly on a pile of cow manure,' he said. 'You eat little children who haven't even had time to earn their souls.'" (99)

In addition, there is a Dominican association with violence to women's bodies since there is the reference to the narrator's great grandmother massacred

by "Dominican soldiers" in 1937. Thus this gardener denies Marie the right to this new kind of motherhood by interrupting her imaginary world where she can find refuge and re-create her past. He also denies the baby a proper burial thus disallowing Marie to continue the country traditions that cannot live in this sterile city. It is not until these Haitian women have contact with an outsider, someone from a different cultural background with other perspectives to offer, that we will see in *Krik? Krak!* a more liberating outcome that offers them choices on who they are or can be.

In the next two stories for example, the location might still be the town of Ville Rose, but both young girls expand their horizons through their contact with foreign women. In the case of the sixth story, "The Missing Peace," the narrator who is called "Lamort" because her mother died while giving birth to her, will be changed by her contact with Emilie, an American woman searching for her mother's dead body in Haiti. At the beginning of the story, the narrator and her boyfriend, possibly a Tonton Macoute, are playing "with leaves shaped like butterflies." (103) The fact that these butterflies are not real, is the illusion of a happiness that will quickly be shattered when the girl is faced with the reality of her situation as she is helping the American woman (possibly Haitian-American since she speaks Creole and is Black) to find her missing mother, a journalist for a radical paper in Port-au-Prince. After the two women are threatened and mistreated by one of her boyfriend's bullies for being outside after curfew, they

return to Lamort's house where Emilie tells her that "they should have given [her] [her] mother's name...That is the way it should have been." (109) The possibility of another (self) identity is opened up and at the end of the story (the first one to end in on a positive note) the young girl firmly faces her grandmother and thus breaks the fatality of her existence: "´Today, I want you to call me by another name ... I want you to call me by her name ... Marie Magdalène.' I liked the sound of that." (122)

This newly discovered freedom will also take place in the following story "Seeing Things Simply," which also takes place in Ville Rose. In this story, the "outsider" is a Guadeloupean woman painter who lives in the part of Ville Rose where the French-speaking artists and writers have their "gingerbread houses perched on the hills that overlooked Ville Rose's white sand beaches." (128) The painter, Catherine, makes nude portraits of Princesse, a sixteen year-old who tries to "sound less native and more French" whenever she speaks" to Catherine. (128) She admires this painter not just because she is foreign and goes to Paris, but because of what she teaches her. "Each time she went to Catherine's, Princesse would learn something different." (133) The most important lesson Princesse will receive will be the fact that one can re-create oneself *and* the world around us through art. When Catherine gives her one of her portraits as a gift, Princess is shocked to realize that it is her but different:

> Princesse peered at this re-creation, not immediately recognizing herself, but then seeing in the face, the eyes, the breasts, a very true replication of

> her body […] She was slowly becoming familiar with what she saw there. It was her all right, recreated. (139)

It is this realization of being able to re-create one's world that inspires Princesse to want to be a painter just like Catherine: "It struck Princess that this is why she wanted to make pictures, to have something to leave behind even after she was gone, something that showed what she had observed in a way that no one else had and no one else would after her." (140) At the end of the story, there is an exact scene like that from the beginning. There is a cockfight going on in the background and a drunk husband is fighting with this wife. This time, Princess stops and from far away begins to draw their faces in the dust. "When she was done, Princess got up and walked away, leaving the blank faces in the dirt for the next curious voyeur to add a stroke to." (141) This openendedness of re-visioning could not have been possible without her vision having been expanded by her contact with Catherine. Even though the story ends with the exact same lines as it started, Princess's life has been changed and may lead her to take "the butterfly's way," whatever that may be.

In both "The Missing Peace" and "Seeing Things Simply" the presence of tradition or contact with foremothers is almost non-existent since there is not (yet) a separation from the mother/land which necessitates this re-visioning or re-invention of tradition in order to survive in a strange world. One place this invention certainly takes place is through the tension between generations which leads to a redefinition of identity in the last two stories of the book – the only ones

that take place in the U.S. As Clifford explains, "Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension"[263], and this struggle is most evident in the story "New York Day Women." Here again Danticat uses an interweaving of narrative voices as in "Children of the Sea," but this time it is the voices of a daughter and mother who are not necessarily in dialogue with each other. Both the narrative strategy and the often conflicting content of the voices seem to reflect the distance between these two identities, but the young daughter's objectification of her mother as she follows and observes her in the streets of New York City exposes her attempt at negotiating the complexities of Haitian identity – especially when living in the U.S.

Stuart Hall explains this conflict of positioning oneself in a cultural identity as "an enigma, as a problem, as an open question" which not only reflect the "internal trauma" of

> the external processes and pressures of exploitation [of slavery, colonization], but the way that internally one comes to collude with the objectification of oneself which is a profound misrecognition of one's own identity.[264]

In "New York Day Women," the title seems to be in opposition with the title of the fourth story "Night Women," which, as already discussed, offers alternate female definitions of Haitian women. Nevertheless, the "day woman" in this story, the first one to explore the complexities of the Haitian diaspora in New

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[263] James Clifford 312.
[264] Stuart Hall 8.

York, is the narrator's mother who slowly exposes a different identity to her daughter. As the daughter follows her mother through the city, she finds out many things about her mother she didn't know: "I have never seen her in this kind of neighborhood, peering into Chanel and Tiffany's and gawking at the jewels glowing in the Bulgari windows." (145) It happens that the mother is on her way to her secret job taking care of a woman's child at a park while she goes off for a jog. "My mother, who never went to any of my Parent-Teacher Association meetings when I was at school." (154) The mother's responses, or the daughter's memories of her mother, are in bold type just like the letters of the woman in "Children of the Sea:" **"You're so good anyway. What are they going to tell me? I don't want to make you ashamed of this day woman. Shame is heavier than a hundred bags of salt."** (154)

Both the mother's perception of her daughter and her daughter's perceptions of her are affected by their disparate cultural contexts, and the interweaving of their voices in this narrative creates a crossroads where identities are both articulated and negotiated. Even if the daughter cannot fully relate to her mother, the exchanges that occur lead her to a past that inevitably has a say on who she is, even if that past is long gone or far away in Haiti, as Stuart Hall explains:

> The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of

> identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning.[265]

This positioning, as Simone James Alexander explains regarding Caribbean female writers, creates complex relationships between daughters and mothers as well as "complex ambiguous relationships with their various 'home' spaces: leading to a "triangular relationship among mother, the motherland(s) to include both Africa and the Caribbean, and the mother country."[266]

> On one level the political conflicts between the motherland and the mother country are given expression or, rather, are exposed within the personal mother-daughter relationship. It is through the daughter that this conflict-ridden relationship is channeled and the notion of an ideal colonial mother or mother country is debunked.[267]

Edwidge Danticat herself seems to be trying to come to terms with the fact that her own mother left her behind in Haiti when she was four to come to the U.S., and they were not reunited until Danticat was 12. This traumatic experience is mostly exorcised in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* where the protagonist Sophie is left behind in Haiti by her mother and their reunion in New York is a very painful and conflicting one. Danticat admits this novel is "more emotionally autobiographical than anything else,"[268] and Sophie's struggle to come to terms with leaving behind her Tante Atie (i.e. the motherland) and accepting her not so perfect newly adopted mother/country is a very strong theme found at the end of *Krik? Krak!*. The young

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[265] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990) 226.
[266] Simone James Alexander, *Mother Imagery* 3.
[267] Ibid 8.

Haitian women of the last two stories have to mediate between their "motherland" and this new "mother country" which is not all they had truly envisioned. As Susheila Nasta explains, "demythologizing the illusion of the colonial mothercountry [leads to] a genesis of new forms and new languages of expression"[269] since the daughter must negotiate between the mother, the motherlands, and the mother country.

Nowhere is this negotiation more strongly felt than in the last story, "Caroline's Wedding," where the same conflicting feelings towards the mother are experienced by the narrator of the story who has just received her American naturalization certificate and who wants to run to her mother "waving the paper like the head of an enemy rightfully conquered in battle." (157) The irony of this statement takes us back to a previous story, "The Missing Peace," where the American woman mistakenly thinks that she will be alright in Haiti as long as she has her American passport. (114) The legal document is absolutely no good to her in this hostile country just like the narrator realizes that being an "American" doesn't change who she really is inside. She soon realizes that the "enemy" supposedly conquered in battle, her "Haitianness," cannot be killed and that there are things that one can "neither throw away nor keep in plain sight." (195) Her "in-betweenness" is not only due to her inner struggle with her own identity, but

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[268] "A conversation with Edwidge Danticat," *www.randomhouse.com/vintage/dantical.html*.
[269] Susheila Nasta, ed., *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing form Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992) xix.

she is actually "in-between" her Haitian mother and her American sister Caroline who is engaged to a Bahamian man whom the mother does not approve of because he is not "Haitian."

The narrator is the only one of the two sisters who was born in Haiti and thus calls herself "the misery baby," but Caroline was born in the U.S. and is seen as a miracle child who has all the odds in her favor, even though she is missing an arm. The missing arm that has just started to cause her pain, or "phantom pains," seems to represent the attachment to the motherland even without having been born there. There is a constant negotiation between Haitian and American, and whenever the two sisters reject anything "Haitian," their mother excuses them by saying "You know, they are American." (215) For the narrator, this "Americanness" is her "double tragedy" (215), and these contradictions force her to be the mediator whenever her "American" sister and "Haitian" mother argue. In turn, this mediation leads to the narrator's (and the reader's) "self-negotiation" which is the eternal struggle of the diaspora as Clifford explains: "Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place."[270] Danticat herself is mediating and explains that "to be able to write, you have to feel as though someone is lending you their voice, their story, and you're the mediator."[271] She must pick and choose elements from the different voices and create a "new"

[270] Clifford 311.

one that "becomes one voice in a giant chorus that is trying to understand and express artistically what it's like to be a Haitian immigrant in the United States."[272]

This new creation, a process of "customizing" or "versioning," as Clifford calls it, is evident in this last story where the two "Americanized" sisters still remember and reconstruct some Haitian traditions that their parents taught them. For example, they have a game of questions (just like the title *Krik? Krak*!) their father used to play with them, yet at one point the narrator cannot remember exactly how to play it and changes the game by being the one to ask the question first. Her new "customized" game is rejected by her mother who wants to keep the "old" rules: "I am to ask the question first, if we are to play this game." (216)

In addition, through the narrator's dreams we experience her desperation to remember how to do things the "Haitian" way. She dreams about her dead father and again the game of questions comes up. She desperately tries to answer the questions but anxiously realizes: "I don't know the answers" (210), and her father replies to her "you have forgotten how to play the game." (211) She wakes up terrified and "for the first time afraid of the father that [she] saw in [her] dreams." (211) The only way she can overcome this fear of loss is by tapping into her memory, by trying to remember everything her parents taught her, which is what her father used to tell her when he was alive: "You have memory of walking in a

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[271] Shea 49.
[272] "A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat," *www.randomhouse.com/vintage/dantical.html*.

mist at dawn in a banana jungle that no longer exists. You have lived this long in this strange world, so far from home, because you remember." (177)

Thus, as Homi Bhabha asserts, "the 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of life,"[273] and what Danticat finds by returning to the motherland Haiti is "a rich landscape of memory"[274] which she uses to give voice to a Haitian diapora that seems to be in a constant quest for a cultural identity.

In the Epilogue of *Krik? Krak!* Danticat compares the art of writing to braiding hair: "When you write is like braiding hair. Taking a handful of coarse strands and attempting to bring them unity. Your fingers have still not perfected the task." (220) She compares these "unruly strands" to the "diverse women" in her family whom she calls "kitchen poets" because they put different necessary ingredients into the "survival soup" of her memory (222). The phrase "kitchen poets" is partly borrowed from Paule Marshall who used the phrase to encompass the domestic world and the poetic (oral storytelling) world of "kitchen women," giving them the title of "Mother Poets." In "The Making of a writer," Marshall speaks about the self-empowerment that women attain in the kitchen, a space within which they concoct and compose their own language and poetry.

As seen above, another element that connects women in Danticat is her use of hair which is used as a more physical and tangible connection among generations. At the end of her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, she expresses this

[273] Bhabha 7.

importance in what may be the most quoted line of her novel: "I come from a place where breath, eyes, memory are one, a place from which you carry the past like the hair on your head." (234) For the writer, this connections between hair and the past may go back to her own childhood memories of the women of her family, particularly her grandmother whom she remembers vividly:

> As children we would fight to comb her hair, and she would talk about what it was like growing up. We used to go out at night and listen to her, and sometimes it was like she was telling these stories to herself, as though it was internal. Sometimes, she would put us in the story, so in a sense we were the heroes. Also, having the physical contact of combing her hair…I still feel the vibrations from that.[275]

The physical act of braiding hair, a tradition shared by many women of the Africa diaspora, also seems to make up Danticat's sense of identity – her connection to the other "motherland" Africa. The act of braiding usually entails bringing unity to three "unruly strands" – the mother, the motherland, and the mother country – into one unified entity in which the three parts are still distinguishable yet make up a new creation. She ends *Krik? Krak!* with her narrator recalling her mother making her braids "Sunday-pretty, even during the week."

> When she was done she would ask you to name each braid after the nine hundred and ninety-nine women who were boiling in your blood, and since you had written them down and memorized them, the names would come rolling off your tongue. And this was your testament to the way that these women lived and died and lived again. (224)

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[274] Mackay 36.
[275] Shea 44.

The interweaving, or braiding, of all these women's voices is what makes up her work, and it is through this diversity that the process of identity negotiation comes about. It is in this "overlap and displacement of domains of difference that the intersubjectivity and collective experience of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated."[276] It is through this negotiation that "takes you 'beyond' yourself in order to return in a spirit of revision and reconstruction" that this young writer engages in what she calls "*maroonage* in language … something [that] covertly tries to protect the self."[277] "I'm maroonage,"[278] she insists, and her work seems to follow René Depestre's idea of "*marronage culturel*," a sort of "*guérilla poétique*"[279] necessary not only to resist the dominant culture but to create a new "métissage culturel" full of new and endless possibilities. Just like Haitian music and primitive paintings which are on the surface playful and lighthearted yet have a highly political double meaning, Edwidge Danticat's own covert resistance takes the Haitian diaspora, as well as all of humanity, "beyond" itself. She brings hope and solidarity by opening new doorways for all the modern-day "maroons" trying to protect their selves as they "escape" either to the U.S. or any other part of the world.

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[276] Bhabha 2.
[277] Shea 48.
[278] Shea 49.
[279] Rene Depestre, *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude,* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1980) 33.

Conclusion: Popularizing and Valorizing a Global Métissage

> Il faut valoriser les nouveaux métissages culturels qui remettent en question les métissages traditionnels déjà stratifiés par l'usage.
>
> Maryse Condé, *Penser la créolité*

This sentiment by Maryse Condé from her 1995 essay "Chercher nos vérités," the conclusion to the study *Penser la créolité*, echoes the works of the three women writers studied in this dissertation, as they anticipated in the 1980's and early 90's the inevitability of today's multi-ethnic global world. The "métissages traditionnels" of identities that were fixed in the 18th and 19th centuries and that have been the legacy of colonialism and European domination have been challenged by these writers' valorization of the new vibrant and ever-changing "métissages culturels" Condé had called for years before. Today's young writers, like Nicholas Samaras, see this "brave new world"[280] as "a place of no fences,"[281] a place where traditional questions of race, ethnicity and even gender have ceased to exist creating a new type of "metaphysical internationalism" that erases the old boundaries of identity.[282] The "predicament

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[280] Maryse Condé's 1998 key note speech for the ALA conference was entitled "O Brave New World" and focuses on the positive aspects of globalization and cultural diversity. Published in *Multiculturalism and Hybridity in African Literatures*, ed. Hal Wylie and Ben Lindfords (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2000).

[281] Nicholas Samaras "No Countries but the Distance of the World," *The Beacon Best of 2000: Great Writing by Women and Men of all Colors and Cultures*. ed. Edwidge Danticat (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

[282] Nicholas Samaras is a Greek-American poet whose work focuses on a "metaphysical internationalism […] of the eternal exiled who yet finds remarkable and life-enhancing

of the hyphen" as Ella Shohat concludes, has become far more complicated with more and more people having multiple alliances, or hyphens, which cannot be easily simplified (as in the United Sates census) into neat categories of "races" like Black, Hispanic, Asian, or Other.

> Each chain of hyphens implies a complicated history of accreted identity and fragmented belonging, as multiple displacements generate distinct "distillations" of immigrant identity. But often the "host" country acknowledges only one link in the chain, and which link is stamped as "real" tells us less about the immigrant than about the geopolitical imaginary of the host.[283]

It is this geopolitical imaginary, which tries to reinforce the hegemonic identity definitions of the host to preserve its power over the immigrant, that writers like Sebbar, Beyala, and Danticat have dared to challenge and by doing so have not only raised questions of ethnic minorities or immigrants, but have questioned French and American identities themselves. Similarly, regarding immigration in France Azouz Begag assures that questions of "immigrés" are less and less about an ethnic minority and more and more a questioning of French ethnicity itself.[284]

As shown in the chapters above, the way these writers have successfully challenged fixed hegemonic identity definitions in general is by creating 'in-between' spaces, as Homi Bhabha defines them, that "provide the terrain for

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particularities in the countries through which he passes." Forward of Samara's *Hands of the Saddlemaker* by James Dicky.

[283] Ella Shohat, "Coming to America: Reflections on Hair and Memory Loss," *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, eds. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) 292.

elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."[285] The 'in-between' spaces these writers managed to create at the end of the 20th century are now the modern arena for dialogue where today's multi-ethnic global culture is being mediated, understood, and becoming more than a "phenomenon" but rather a universal norm.

Through the opening of dialogue in their works, these women writers anticipated the now shattered notion of an "authentic culture" which anthropologists like Renato Rosaldo were envisioning years ago:

> The view of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable in a postcolonial world. Neither 'we' nor 'they' are as self-contained and homogeneous as we/they once appeared. All of us inhabit an interdependent late 20th century world, which is at once marked by borrowing and lending across porous cultural boundaries, and saturated with inequality, power, and domination.[286]

Thus, the way these writers have infiltrated these "porous cultural boundaries" has not only impacted their own "culture," but the hegemonic system itself has been transformed through the writers' counterdiscourses which ultimately may become indistinguishable as "counter" and simply become part of an ever-changing "dominant" discourse. What is truly happening at the point of contact between cultures, or at the 'in-between' spaces of dialogue, is not

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[284] Azouz Begag and Abdellatif Chaouite, *Écarts d'identité* (Paris: Seuil, 1990) 31.
[285] Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 1-2.
[286] Renato Rosaldo, "Ideology, Place, People without Culture," *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (February 1988) 87.

"assimilation" or "acculturation," as François Lionnet explains, but rather "transculturation," a neologism (transculturación) used by the Cuban poet Nancy Morejón "to describe a process of cultural intercourse and exchange, a circulation of practices which creates a constant interweaving of symbolic forms and empirical activities among the different interacting cultures."[287] In the case of Leïla Sebbar, for example, the mixing of popular Raï groups like "Carte de Séjour" in her novels, who at the time were not very well known outside of the Beur community in France, with other popular "French" and American items like Adidas, Macdo and Camel cigarettes, offered her the opportunity to bring together Beur and French youth into the same arena of dialogue since they both had security blankets to hold on to during the exchange. Ultimately, and I am not implying that Raï became famous because of Sebbar, the infiltration of one culture into the other does take place and the "borrowing and lending across porous borders" inevitably occurs.

The fact that the hegemonic system is ultimately transformed during the process of cultural exchange brings up the question of who the audience of these writers really is. Is Leïla Sebbar writing for the Beur community or for a truly French audience who is drawn to her work by exotic titles like *Shérazade* just to have any preconceptions of the exotic Arab heroine shattered? And what has made Calixthe Beyala such a celebrity in France? Is it because of her African

[287] Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representation: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithica and

readership, or is it the advertising behind her products that have sold her to a French market? Would Edwidge Danticat been read by her fellow Haitian-Americans had she not been on the Oprah Winfrey show presented as an acceptable read by the queen of talk shows? Who bought her Oprah Winfrey Book Club winner anyway and why? These questions all revolve around the power of the media to expose these women writers to the dominant discourse which they are ultimately transforming.

The difference between these writer's and those of the 1960's and 70's is that they have utilized the media to make a name for themselves and become popular icons both in their community as well as world-wide. One can see the progression of this strategy with Sebbar being the least media-involved in the mid-80's and then someone like Calixthe Beyala using all her resources in the 1990's to make her way into the limelight with television appearances, scandals of all kinds, and involvement in all sorts of mainstream projects.[288] As Alec Hargreaves explains, changes in French television since the mid-80's have been key in allowing these otherwise marginalized ethnic groups to make their way onto the screen.

> Though by no means absent from the TV screen, immigrants and their descendants occupied extremely limited spaces in this, the most powerful medium of the post-colonial era. During the last ten years, the French state has lost its monopoly over the airwaves [and] finds its authority

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London: Cornell University Press, 1995) 11.

[288] Beyala even has her own website www.calixthe.beyala.free.fr where she promotes her work and other projects she is involved in.

> increasingly challenged by new technologies opening the flow of television images to forces beyond its control.[289]

The appearance of these minorities on television, and to a lesser extent on the radio, have had the powerful effect of destabilizing notions of national identity that had previously seemed cohesive and stable since as Azouz Begag asserts, "l'image (de la télé) est devenue le lieu privilégié de la formation et de la décomposition des identités collectives."[290] The power of today's media, both through television and the internet, has without a doubt shaped and even produced new identities. In their discussion on multiculturalism and the media, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam emphasize the power of the media in any identity production:

> In a transnational world typified by the global circulation of images and sounds, goods and people, media spectatorship impacts complexly on national identity and communal belongings. By facilitating an engagement with distant peoples, the media "deterritorialize" the process of imagining communities.[291]

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, "deterritorialization," as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, in whatever form, is a revolutionary tool used by today's postcolonial women writers to dismantle fixed identities and arrive at a renewed "territory" or identity positioning that ultimately empowers them. While before the media might have served to marginalize and exclude minorities, today it is being used more and more by people like Beyala and Danticat to create

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[289] Alec G. Hargreaves, "Gatekeepers and Gateways: Post-colonial minorities and French television," *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 84.
[290] Begag 92.
[291] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 7.

allegiances that may ultimately deterritorialize and transform societies as a whole.[292] On this subject, Shohat and Stam insist that "just as the media can "otherize" cultures, they can also promote multicultural coalitions. [T]he media today are more multicentered, with the power not only to offer countervailing representations but also to open up parallel spaces for symbiotic multicultural transformation."[293]

In the United States, one power house that is shaping the world is The Oprah Winfrey Show which, as explained in Chapter 3, had, among many other minorities, Edwidge Danticat as a guest in the famous talk show host's Book Club. As John Young asserts in his study of the "Oprah Effect" on the production of literature, "Oprah Winfrey's television book club has dramatically shifted the publishing world's balance of power."[294] In addition, as Gayle Feldman commented in *The New York Times Book Review:*

> The club has also made manifest that Ms. Winfrey is the most powerful book marketer in the United States. On a really good day, she sends more people to bookstores than the morning news programs, the other daytime shows, the evening magazines, radio shows, print reviews and feature articles rolled into one.[295]

Specifically discussing Toni Morrison, who has had three appearances on the show to promote her work, Young describes this phenomenon as a "dramatic

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[292] In the case of Beyala, she created the "Collectif Egalité" in 1998 to denounce the lack of "visible minorities" on French television. Her association has been relatively successful at changing the make-up of minorities on French television today.
[293] Shohat and Stam 7.
[294] John Young, "Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and the Postmodern Popular Audiences," *African American Review,* Summer 2001, 35(2):181.

example of postmodernism's merger between canonicity and commercialism" and insists that these appearances "replace separate white and black readerships with a single, popular audience."[296] This has definitely become an established trend in the now so popular "book clubs" that have emerged following Oprah Winfrey's. These clubs do see the Oprah Book Club seal on the chosen books as a sign of a higher power's approval and do not hesitate to incorporate them into their discussions.[297]

Such powerful paratextual signs of approval are also very common in France where, as in the case of Calixthe Beyala's *Assèze l'Africaine*, books appear in shops with the red and white "bande de lancement" which connotes a best-selling or canonical author. As discussed in Chapter 2, the wise marketing of Beyala's novels has made her a name that sells and an overall celebrity in France. Several of her novels are now available in the low-priced "livre de poche" format produced by *Editions J'ai lu* which has been described as being devoted mostly to "paraliterature."[298] Several critics see this mass marketing of her work as a sign of the "highly ambiguous relationship that she maintains with Western readers"[299] and accuse her of selling out to a market that demands a certain level of exoticism

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[295] Quoted by John Young 188.
[296] Ibid 181.
[297] This is a person observation from my own experience in a book club, which is made up primarily of young "White" working mothers. When I joined, I thought I would share my "higher" knowledge of postcolonial literature, and tried to pitch works by writers like Edwidge Danticat. To my surprise, the club had already read several of these books all because they had been chosen by the "Oprah Book Club."
[298] Boniface Mongo, "Beyala: Writing on the Edge," www.africultures.com

and sensationalism. Ambroise Kom, a compatriot of Beyala, strongly reproaches such content in her work:

> Beyala does not hesitate to use stereotypes, no matter how abominable, to speak out against the perfidiousness of women and to show how they have fallen into men's traps (…) and it is quite understandable why the critics are so quick to accuse Beyala of throwing herself into pornographic writing, a technique intended to attract readers in search of cheap eroticism and exoticism.[300]

The fact that Beyala is far more popular with Western readers than with her own compatriots leads some to fear a kind of "neo-colonial incorporation symbolized not only in her packaging but also in the prize she was recently awarded by the *Académie française*, the self-appointed bastion of high culture in metropolitan France."[301] The controversy with the French academy awarding Beyala the prestigious *Grand prix du roman de l'Académie française* stems from the fact that she was accused of plagiarizing Ben Okri's award winning novel *The Famished Road*. The Nigerian writer points out that "if the academicians were really aware of what was going on in the world of literature, they would not have stumbled into this embarrassment."[302] Since his novel had won the Booker prize in 1991, the academy's knowledge of post-colonial literature is put into question

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[299] Ibid.
[300] Ambroise Kom quoted in Boniface Mongo's "Beyala: Writing on the Edge."
[301] Nicki Hitchcott, "Calixthe Beyala and the Post-Colonial Woman," *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 214.
[302] Max Seaton, Dan Glaister and Alex Duval Smith, "Famished Road feeds French book fever," *Guardian*, November 26 1996.

and, as Hitchcott concludes, "the 'Beyala affair' suggests tokenism and incorporation on the part of the *Académie française*."[303]

So the question remains whether or not the connections between high cultural forms and popular audiences empowers or not women writers like Danticat and Beyala who have found themselves in the limelight as diasporic spokeswomen. As already noted above, the fact that Beyala's books are sold like hot cakes in certain big supermarkets in France and at the same time are given prestigious academic prices and are studied in many Western universities makes many critics question the true effect of this phenomena. Danticat's appearance in the Oprah Winfrey show as well as on other television programs like "Basic Black"[304] combined with her continued involvement in both politics and academia also shares this connection between "high" and "low" culture which has shed a new light on Haitian-Americans as well as African Americans in the U.S. The popularity of these women writers could rely mostly on the fact that their work is classified as what Elleke Boehemer calls "migrant texts" since these works are especially popular with readers and critics in the metropole because "although bearing all the attractions of the exotic, the magical, the Other, they also participate reassuringly in [familiar] aesthetic languages."[305] This could certainly

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[303] Hitchcott 214.

[304] This television and radio show has exposes on many African-American celebrities stemming from Hale Berry, bell hooks, Jesse Jackson and Spike Lee. These is a clear mix of "high " and "low" culture just within this show.

[305] Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 236.

be the reason why these writers are not as often read in their countries of origin as in the case of Beyala:

> However surprisingly, African readers and academics largely ignore Beyala. Even in Cameroon, the country she was born in and the world chosen for a number of her works, it would seem that – other than her flamboyant appearances on national television during her occasional trips back to her home country – Beyala and her works go completely unnoticed.[306]

Nevertheless, Beyala's texts do pertain specifically to the postcolonial condition of the African woman living in France, and this may explain the lack of interest for her work in Cameroon versus her extreme popularity in the metropole. However, the ultimate fear with the popularization of women writers like Beyala, Sebbar and Danticat is the fact that these women's texts are commodified and the women themselves can be "constructed in the process of transnational mediation to meet First World expectations."[307] Can "popular culture" be politically correct and overcome what Wahneema Lubiano calls the "slippery ground between reaching people and commodification?"[308] In the case of "Third World" women's writing, there exists an unavoidable contradiction that may or may not be "ultimately debilitating:"

> Third World women's writing in the transnational era seeks to distinguish its own set of aims from those of mainstream (including those of mainstream White feminism), yet its own material production and dissemination paradoxically are, to a large extent, sustained by the

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[306] Boniface Mongo "Beyala: Writing on the Edge."
[307] Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, Introduction to *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000) 4.
[308] Wahneema Lubiano's intervention in "A Symposium on Popular Culture,: *Social Text*, No. 36 (Fall 1993) 14. Quoted in Ella Shohat and Robert Sham p. 340.

> institutional mechanisms of that mainstream culture (publishing companies, book or poetry tours and readings, and academic conferences, most of which are located in the West).[309]

The risk of commodifying these women's texts arises when "literary decisions come together with marketing strategies and assessments of audience appeal (ranging from interest in the "exotic" to feminist solidarity) to foreground certain texts and repackage or silence others."[310] The importance of a target market and sales figures can ultimately shape the final text and thus affect the message intended initially by the writer.

In addition, some critics believe that this same effect has occurred in the feminist arena where the Western domination of global feminism has resulted in the colonization and homogenization of the "Third World woman." As Chandra Mohanty strongly argues in her work "Under Western Eyes," a new development of global feminist writings

> discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular 'third world woman"- an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse.[311]

As a response to this development, a new theoretical model evolved which "challenged the universalizing tendencies of global feminism with a 'politics of

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[309] Alpana Sharma Knippling, "'Sharp contrasts of all colours': The Legacy of Toru Dutt," *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000) 210.
[310] Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj 4.

location' emphasizing specificity and locality."[312] The term *politics of location* was first coined by the American feminist Adrienne Rich in the early 80's after a trip to Nicaragua "as a way to examine the implications of one's standpoint in shaping political perspectives and knowledge, and to explore alternatives to the homogenizing tendencies of global feminism."[313] While in Nicaragua on a conference, Rich got to know many of the local women and realized that not all women shared the same priorities White women have. She thus came to the realization that White women needed to give up their "missionary" position towards other women and should rather acknowledge and respect these different cultural priorities.

This new approach emphasized the importance of "authenticity" and popularized such narrative genres as the *testimonios,* which supposedly allowed Third World writers to express themselves "with directness and immediacy on behalf of themselves and their communities."[314] The *testimonios* by Latin American women, for example, became extremely popular among American scholars in the late 1980's. One of the most studied *testimonios* is one written by an indigenous Guatemalan woman entitled *I...Rigoberta Menchú, an Indian Woman in Guatemala*, which actually won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

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[311] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991) 53.
[312] Amireh and Suhair Majaj 8.
[313] Ibid 9.
[314] Ibid 10.

However, the criticism on this "politics of location" stems from the fact that this theoretical model can cause a mystification of cultures, which may ultimately lead to extreme and dangerous identity positions. In her criticism on "politics of location" Caren Kaplan warns on these fallbacks:

> A politics of location is not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be reestablished and reaffirmed. We should be suspicious of any use of the term to naturalize boundaries and margins under the guise of celebration, nostalgia, or inappropriate assumptions of intimacy.[315]

Another result of such cultural mystification is the West's appropriation of Third World writers' cultural and material production "while denying both their achievements and its own appropriation, thus consolidating its sense of self and glorifying its own cultural anthropophagy."[316] In Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's opinion, "[The West] separates forms from their performers, converts those forms into influences, brings those influences into the center, leaves the living sources on the margin, and pats itself on the back for being so cosmopolitan."[317]

A similar attitude can clearly be seen today in Western politics where being pro-multiculturalism helps politicians gain votes even though they could care less about the poor minorities in their countries. Such mentality can jeopardize progressive efforts by women like Danticat and Beyala who find

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[315] Caren Kaplan *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 187.
[316] Ella Shohat and Robert Sham 3.
[317] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Making Difference: Mapping the Discursive Terrain of Multiculturalism," draft of a paper given to and quoted by Ella Shohat and Robert Sham in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* 3.

themselves in the political limelight speaking out for the rights of their people. The ultimate challenge for them lies in being able to walk the tightrope of "a productive in-between stance, one that steadfastly refuses both the imagined sanctity of a pure position on the outside and the imagined comfort of standing in for a familiar and domesticated Other."[318] What matters is that they continue to speak through whatever medium they can and for them to maintain agency and control of their own identities. Regardless of whether these women writers are exoticized or commodified, they have managed to take these negative Western hegemonic forces, infiltrate them, and use them to empower themselves and ultimately empower the presence of the "postcolonial woman" and multiculturalism in general in the "brave new world" of the 21st century.

[318] Alpana Sharma Knippling 210.

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